

interzone



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'Naturals'

Gregory Benford

Tanith Lee
Tony Ballantyne
Chris Butler
Martha A. Hood



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Naturals

Gregory Benford

At times Dawn thought that she was, well, a bit too intense. She seemed to have too much personality for one person and yet not enough for two.

Perhaps the cause lay in her upbringing? She had been most attentively raised by her Meta, an ancient term for the meta-family of loosely related people clustered around her biological father and mother. A Meta provided an overview, a larger vision of how to grow up.

The Meta had spotted her as a wild card, early on. It made no difference. Though hers, the Hard River Meta, was entirely, deliberately populated by Naturals – those without deep-seated connections to external machine intelligences – not many were Originals. Dawn was an Original of particularly primordial type, based on genes that had great vintage. Other Originals carried genes that had passed through revisions so many times that, in comparison, Dawn's suite was a fossil.

This gave her a kind of status. Not many Originals walked the Earth, though the historians who pestered her early education said there had once been billions of them afoot.

Billions! There were hardly a tenth that many now in all Earthly humanity. Not that she cared much about such numbers; few in her time bothered to scale the heights of analysis that the ancient civilizations had climbed, marked as their own, and finally abandoned as too chilly, remote and inhuman.

She cared far more for things close by, not abstractions. That was the gift of living in Hard River Meta – the natural world, custom-made for Naturals. They had enough

technology to be comfortable, but did not waste time tending to it. Nobody much cared about events beyond their horizon. She had dozens of good friends and saw them daily. Children had jobs that meant something and nobody lorded it over others. Leadership rotated. Her life was one of small, steady delights.

She was happy, but. The filling in of the rest of that sentence would, she knew quite early, occupy the rest of her life. And she knew even then that the things she sought in life could disappear even as she reached for them, the way a fist went away when she opened her hand.

She suspected her antic energy came from a heavy genetic legacy. As an Original, she knew herself to be something of a hothouse plant, and not an orchid, either. More like a cactus, feverishly flowering under the occasional passing shower. Anyone who showered her with attention got her one-plus-some personality, ready or not. She wore people out.

Especially, she tired her fellow Originals, in their orderly oatmeal lives. She suspected that she carried some Supra genes, or maybe some of the intermediate breeds of human that had been in vogue through the last several hundred million years. She tried to find out if this might be so, and hit the stone wall of Meta security, whose motto in most matters genetic was Best Not to Know.

So she watched herself for telltale signs of intermediate forms. Nobody would help her, and she was too close to herself to be objective – and who wasn't? A stutter she developed at age nine – could that be a telltale? She worried endlessly. Bit off fingernails, even when they were

part of her extendible tools. Then the stutter went away. Another telltale?

She felt as though she might very well spend the rest of her life with her button nose pressed against the glass of a room where she should be, only she couldn't find the door.

Her Meta never told her exactly who her parents were. She only knew that some pair among the 60 or so in her Meta had given birth to her, genetically. Just which pair? She sometimes wondered. It was usually reassuring that the genetic parents often did not themselves recall – and sometimes, not reassuring at all.

But then, growing up was not supposed to be easy. A woman in her Meta once said to her, "It's the toughest work you'll ever do." For a long while Dawn had thought this an exaggeration. Now she was not so sure she could even do it.

The troubling question was, when was growing up over? Maybe never.

Supras were around as (unneeded) reminders that some people really were better than you. Worse, better in ways that were not even easy to put a finger on – a feature she had noted in adults, when she was just a kid. Even the Supra children of her age were daunting. They ignored her, of course.

The means of making a fresh person were so complex that old ideas like simple parenting, with strictly assignable designer DNA, were useless. The Meta loved her, brought her to the verge of first maturity, and so fell heir to the usual blame for the traumas everyone suffered just in getting that far.

Many women in her Meta mothered Dawn, as time came available and their interest allowed. Some years it would be smiling, big-breasted Andramana, and other years it would be lean, cool, analytical Iratain. Others, too – maybe half a dozen, each fine in their moments, then receding into the background as others came to the fore.

The Meta's men provided fathering, too, but here the usual Meta scheme went awry. She was supposed to gain from multiple fatherings, to see what men were like in general, and work on her attachment strategies in light of this. So much for theory.

By accident she learned that her genetic father had left the Meta for undisclosed reasons when she was three years old. She remembered some dim sensations of him – a dark musk, deeply resonant voice, and whiskers (an affectation, apparently quite ancient). That was all, but it was enough.

So, thinking it absolutely natural, she awaited his return. She dreamed about it – a weighty presence descending from the sky, usually, like angry thunderheads brimming with ribbed light. So she made herself wonderful for him, anticipating his grand return. Occasionally a new male would join the Meta, and she always wondered if maybe this new set of smells and sounds was her One True Father.

She could not be sure, of course, because the Meta kept fatherhood and motherhood secret. Not so much because it was hugely significant, though. Just policy. People would put too much weight on those old, simple con-

nections, so best be done with them.

The Meta felt that such genetic details were totally beside the point. What mattered, truly, was the Meta and its work. Humans did not reproduce like animals, after all, anchored in primordial musk.

Dawn wasn't having any of this, though she never said so. Her gut feelings won out over all inherited wisdom. She simply kept making herself wonderful for him, sure he would show up. And of course, when he did, she would know.

Her true mother might be within an arm's reach at any moment, in the milling Meta culture, but that had no claim on her attention. Her mother's identity was a conventional puzzle, dulled by overuse. Father, now there was true singing mystery.

He grew daily in her imagination. She loved him, she worshipped him, she built whole stories around his exploits. *Dad's Dangerous Days*, Chapter 37.

By this time, no man who ever came into the Meta ever matched the specifications of Her Father, so she was quite sure that he had never returned. She sat dutifully through the ritual experiences of a Meta upbringing, honestly enjoying them but knowing deep down that they were preliminaries to the moment when she would really know, down deep – when her Father returned.

Somehow, as her years stacked up, this yearning never fastened upon her Mother. She did wonder still which of the women of the Meta might be her Mother, but the issue did not have heft, did not wrap itself in the shadowy shroud of the Father. Obviously. Though she sometimes wondered why this was so.

When she spoke about it with any of the adults in her Meta, they carefully reasoned with her and it all seemed straightened out, crystal clear until she left the room. Then she would run free again, down the hallways of her mind, banging on doors, ready with her Father Story to tell.

She had noticed early on that everyone had a story to tell, and not about Fathers. So she got one, too. She was just another Original, a genetic form roughly close to the variety that had started civilization off, so long ago that to express it took an exponential notation.

Her story was about the Father, of course, only cloaked in Meta language. Her life story did not quite seem to belong to her, though. She used it to get close to people, and she did care about them... but relating ostensibly personal sub-stories about herself seemed to be like offering them for barter. In return for... what? She was not sure.

So people – first from her Meta, then from allied Metas – came into her life, shaped it, and departed, their bags already packed. She wondered if everyone experienced life this way – that others came in, introduced themselves, exchanged confidences, and then milled around in her life until they found an exit. She valued them terribly at the time, but they left only smudged memories.

After a while she started dining out on the delightful details of people she knew, things they did. Other people were so much easier to talk about. She had sharpened her powers of observation, looking for her Father. The step from Watcher to Critic was easy, fun. People were the most complex things in the world, ready-made for sto-

ries. Exotica like the slow-walking croucher trees and skin-winged floater birds were fun, but in the end had no stories. The natural world didn't, usually. She suspected that civilization had been invented to make more stories.

And after a while, she came to feel that most others deserved her implied tribute: they really were more interesting than she was. Sometimes she felt like saying to strangers, "Hello, and welcome to my anecdote."

The electric leer of artfully crafted memory guided her. People remembered each other because they recalled stories, for stories made the person. With the myriad ways to remember, from embedded inboards to external agent-selves, there were endless fertile ways to sort and filter and rewrite the stories that were other people's lives. At times, she soon noticed, people constructed stories that were missing parts, as if the business of being themselves did not hold their full attention. Shoddy work. She was much, much better at it.

She was intent upon the sliding scale that people showed her. Boys her age would ooze from arrogant to impressive in the span of a single sentence, and then back down that slope again – and she was never sure just why.

At times she was not quite certain who she was. When she was with the boys she knew growing up, she often thought that she was more alive for being with them. He thinks, therefore I am. Afterward, she would enjoy the feeling of having been with a boy and come through it all right, free of awful embarrassing moments, and most especially, without seeing in them The Father.

Instead, she had the odd feeling of being disconnected: *This will be fun to remember*. Not: *This is fun now*.

She had the usual sexual adventures. Kissing was sometimes like devouring the other person, savouring the sweet, swarthy head meat, no sauce. Bright grins, dark excesses. Even then, though, she came to feel that lust lacked, well, depth. Amid the mad moment, she would sometimes think, *This reminds me of the time I felt déjà vu*.

But if you couldn't learn from experience, what was left? She talked about this with one of the older women in her Meta, who said dryly, "The best definition of intelligence is the ability to learn not from your mistakes, but from others'." Dawn went away puzzled. She needed not advice, but a Road Map of Life.

So she resolved: until she knew where she stood, she would continue lying down. It certainly beat running away. That way she had tried, too: hard him, hesitant her.

There was no cure for such injuries. Dawn endured them because she assumed that, after the ordeals of adolescence were done, she would get her reward – the clear, smooth calm and blithe confidence that adults surely had. After all, they looked self-assured, didn't they? Especially the Supras, who were more than adults.

The few moments when she could tell an adult was uneasy, or awkward, or embarrassed, were excruciating. She made it a point to avoid the fallen adult after that happened; just spending time with them would bring the memory into foreground, risking even more of the same.

So she persisted in her faith, which was, of course, not a dry slate of dictates, but A Story: that, first thing of all, she would pass through schools, then find something she

loved doing, meet men and mate with them (no genetic contracts implied, though), experience raptures and delights unknown to mere young people, survive those and learn from them, and then generally move with growing serenity through the ever-expanding world.

She did manage to finish school. That was as far as her Life Game Plan worked.

Adolescence came upon Dawn unannounced.

The various shades of humanity above Naturals had dispensed with such sudden advents and halts in the body's evolution. Nature's unwanted punctuations, they sniffed. They could orchestrate their tides and rhythms, like an artfully managed story. So she had little warning of the Natural progressions, especially the firm events of an Original such as she. Menstruation arrived with startling, well, frankness. She had senso'd about it, of course, but the sudden flow made her think of a wound, not a grand overture to heart-stopping romance.

When it first happened, she dipped her head as if in prayer to natural forces, knees knocked together to hold in the embarrassment. As if this were not a blossoming, but punishment for a transgression. She fell to her knees, hands linking fingers, head tilted up to a God she did not believe in. Whatever God made of this, He/She/It did not help. The dark hot leaden burn refused to go away.

There was a simple pharmaceutical cure for all this, of course, and one of the Meta women offered it. Dawn automatically rejected it without knowing why.

One Original frontier crossed, she awaited the Virginity Event. The Meta was easy-going about sex. With nearby other Metas it gave scrupulously clear classes and instructional aids. These were carefully not erotic, but in their clinical cheer also did not give any good reason to do The Thing at all. Abstraction prevailed.

At this time she invented her own, interior Theory of Virginity. In her model, virginity was not a single thing, abolished by a single act, but a continuum. She could give away parts of it. After all, wasn't she a many-sided person, even if a mere Natural?

With other Naturals she had tussled quite agreeably on lounging chairs and in cars, preferring the outdoors. But she had not dispensed any of the fractions in her V Inventory, as she termed it to her girl friends.

She had avoided the company of most young women in her Meta, who seemed more attached to the trappings of the world, most of them on their way to being trapped into an attachment, already ordained by the Meta. For Meta-reasons, of course: types Naturally attracted each other, as the conventional wisdom had it. But Dawn never got much of a buzz from the men of her supposed type. Nor from those in the nearby classes of human. She had an arranged meeting with a man of the Sigmas, once, which stood in her mind for the whole round-Dawn-square-men puzzle. Sigmas were usually nude, and as she bandied nonsense with this one, she could not help but notice that he had no apparent genitalia. There was nothing there at all, not even hair.

He saw her glance and said blandly, "It's inside."
"It?"

"The ancient apparatus had several parts, true, but ours is integrated into one shaft." He smiled, as if describing a mildly interesting toy. "The Original design was not elegant. And the danger!" His eyebrows shot up.

"I thought the, uh, older gadget had at least two uses."

"Of course, but we do not excrete through ours."

"Uh, you..."

"Use the rear exit for both."

"And the machinery comes out to play only at recess?"

He laughed quite easily. She was blushing and wished she could stop it, but such control was not available to Originals. "Only as needed, to prevent damage. The shaft generates the semen as well."

She kept her eyes resolutely on his. "No need to have those messy add-ons dangling out in the air?"

"In you Originals that was a design feature to keep the semen cool. We simply adjust our blood flow, lowering the internal temperature in their vicinity."

She kept a purely dispassionate expression on her face, afraid to let her lips move for fear they would lapse into a deranged leer, an O of astonishment, or something even worse. Shouting, *Show me your plumage!* for example. Or *Design feature? Seems more like a bug.* But firmly fixing her face, she said instead, "Is it the same... otherwise?"

For the first time he displayed a knowing grin. "Larger."

"Where have I heard that before?" Though in fact she hadn't.

"To give us an advantage."

"At?"

"Social and biological." His tone was bland but the grin stayed put.

"I'm just all a-twitter."

Absolutely flat: "You should be."

"You're too sure of yourself."

"And you, too unsure." With that he evaporated, turning away and into the spongelike crowd. She felt put down and also lucky, to not know what his next line was.

So it was with the other classes and orders of greater-than-thou humans. They were almost jaunty in their arid certainty that their variation on the grand theme was the best, or at least better than the first. Their men plainly felt that she should be bowled over by the chance to enjoy their obliquely-referred-to talents, endowments or superior wiring diagrams. Their women twisted luscious true-red mouths (no cosmetics!) in sour amusement, sure that she was an upstart tart who had wandered out of her rightful level.

Even if they were all scrupulously correct, and they did have pots of advanced abilities, charm was not one of them. The best aspect of their company was that at least it was not addictive.

For a long time she was terribly aware that everyone knew.

They knew – that she, as an Original, was going through the primordial fever-pitch of oncoming sexual urges, and could do nothing about it. Helpless, swept down hormonal river.

Other times, she was proud of it. She wanted to shout in crowded rooms, "I'm following Nature! Watch!" – and

then do nothing, just stand there brimming with primitive life.

She never did that, of course.

What she did was an intellectual version, in a way, of declaring her Naturalness. Her Originality. She sought out and took an underling position at the Library of Life. In the Vaults.

They deserved the capital letter – vast, forbidding underground repositories of human history. Though the continents continued to grind and shove away at each other, the Ancients (a collective noun covering more time than linear thinking could encompass) had chosen below-ground burial for their legacies. An unconscious repetition of the habit of burying the dead, probably. Primitive.

And there, amid the claustro-corridors far from sunlight, she met Kurani.

He loomed large. Their first job was to unearth a slab that carried intricate data encoded in nuclear spins, a method Kurani termed "savage nouveaux." They trained bright beams upon the flinty surface and machines tracked across the slab, clicking, measuring, sucking up history.

As Kurani's shadow passed before one of the spotlights she felt herself momentarily eclipsed, a chill stealing over her suddenly prickly skin. They had just opened a new Vault and technology hovered in the air like flies. These micro-readers would snap up any data-dust that escaped the slab. Amid the buzz he skated on rippling legs, the Supra carriage gliding smooth and sure. Level, hydraulic, supple.

"Are the indices notified?" he asked of the air.

Nobody seemed sure who was addressed, so she said, "Done already. Dates unclear –"

"A specialty scheme?"

"It seems so," she managed.

He orbited toward her, his size bringing full night to shroud her. "Why did so many of the Ancients think they should redate everything? That some birth or death or collapse of a civilization was so important."

She ventured, adding to his sentence, "That, of course, all human history would ever after be marked from that time."

"Exactly." His smile brought the sun back to her shadowed self.

"So what all those eras have in common is the automatic assumption that they are special."

"Our fault as well." He smiled slightly, turning his full-bore gaze upon her and it was like a second spotlight in the narrow Vault.

"You think time begins with you?" It was not a very bright comment but she had to say something, his eyes were not letting her slide away from them.

"When we meet people we can't see them because we are so busy looking at ourselves to be sure we look all right, in case this should be an important somebody we are just meeting."

To this avalanche of astonishing self-revelation (or was it, with the "we"?) she shot back, "Me too. I'm thinking that I really suddenly see this person, when what I'm seeing is me reflected in their eyes. Me, proving yet again that I am quick and fascinating and that I *can*."

– and then, of course, she saw that he had been speaking aloud what he read in her. Very Supra. But still –

He laughed, sunrise again. “So you almost envy people who are meeting you? Because they’re getting the full you?”

She nodded furiously, not giving herself enough time to see that she was sledding downhill without a clue. And picking up speed. “I keep wanting to meet somebody who is completely on, the way I can be maybe five minutes in a year.”

He turned just slightly, as if a shot had nearly winged him. “The way you are right now.”

How could he know so much? “Oh, this is just warming up.”

A lie, and his quizzical lift of a lip conveyed that he knew it. She was not just downsloping now, but plunging. Skiing on the moment. Maybe big black rocks up ahead, but – it felt glorious.

Still, she couldn’t let him have the last word, even an unspoken one. “I always wanted to be somebody,” she said. A pause. “Maybe I should have been more specific.”

To his credit – even if he did have a huge account with her already – he laughed. Loudly. Big.

The trick, she saw, was to have anything to talk about that was wholly hers. To make the dumb stuff she had believed or done seem at least ardent and naïve, not just boneheaded and Original.

Then, too, there was the toiling, earnest quality to even conversation. Some Supras, far over the horizon somewhere, might spend their vast days on haute fluff, but here all was earnest. Even laughter had a purpose: relieving stress.

From him, weirdly, she learned to relax. To smooth the stress, at least. An Original working among Supras was a mouse foraging for seeds among elephant feet.

(And there still were elephants. They supervised a lot of the heavy manual work. More supple than machines, savvy in the ways living things carried in their guts, they worked joyously, singing, dancing late into the night. She thought they were an excellent, unlikely idea and was astonished to find that they were more ancient than humans, and not invented at all.)

He had methods of soothing the jangled nervewords. Technical ones – inboards, flex triggers to the neuromusculars, tricks even the Supras found necessary. She was shocked to find he did not even know the chemical Original methods, some as strange as alcohol. Their molecules locked agreeably into his receptors, he found, with a sizzle and a shake.

This broke the ice between them, and then the pattern was straightforward. The inevitable came. Between breeds and castes there is always a certain fascination, longing looks cast both up and down the staircase of genetic gradient. He was the primary, she the satellite. He knew centuries, she was not full grown. She learned to relax even more.

Right away he took command of the situation, of her. A Supra utterly at ease, a king. Deep-bass words that rang like bells in her hollow heart. His face, a smile in it somewhere. So many nuances crowded into that clas-

sic expression, it was hard for her to make out the significance of a slightly arched eyebrow, the flashing of his earlobes as they recorded her image, smell, glandular secretions – all for a processor sitting somewhere maybe on the other side of the world, but feeding Kurani all he needed to know to assess the situation. To assess her.

He had her. They both knew it. So they then filled the rest of their first intimate meeting, and then a drink, and then a meal, with fodder-talk. Facts, data, life trajectories sketched out in names of cities and schools and Meta-connections. Sniffing.

All through it she felt as if he were saying something else, or rather more, that subtext flitted through his words like birds, lofty and quick, beings of the moment, gone if not glimpsed.

Uneasily and yet, she supposed, quite Naturally, she sensed that he had arranged all this. Had stalked her, maybe. But in offhand fashion, seemingly without effort, invisibly – and she knew then that he would have her.

In that moment she felt another fraction of her Virginity Inventory vanish, though there had been not a jot of the physical, no act beyond a lifted corner of his ample mouth. She could not take her eyes off that mouth.

He knew it, too. He reached across the table to take her hand. “Simple fingers.” His voice resonated deep notes down to her toes.

She blushed – another Natural response she made a note to get edited out immediately. (Could it be?) She extended three of her tool augmentations through her two shortest fingers, saying lightly, “Not entirely.” The web-sensors that wrapped around her thumbs went without saying.

“Do they feel as supple?” He watched her eyes, not the finger display.

“As – ? How would I know?”

“You could try a recant, you know. Experience what the higher adaptations are like.”

Yes, he had actually said “higher” even though it was very rude. Or maybe because it was.

After the meal they walked the suddenly narrow corridors. Chiselled from rock, the walls gave back everything enhanced. Their boots rang against the walls like snapped fingers, calling her to attention. The Library air hung clammy with time beyond knowing, humid with the pungent breath that she couldn’t quite get enough of. With him beside her the long avenues shrank, seen down the wrong end of a telescope. When he stopped and drew her to him it was entirely like being gathered up. She felt herself blown up a mountainside, driven by an overpowering wind.

“Wait,” she said, and instantly disliked herself.

So much of him, so little of her. With a rich velvety sound he slid his hand down her back. He asked where she lived but it was a formality, of course. He could get it in an eye-flick from his inboards. But she whispered the truth back to him in words gone moist. When they got to her spare, scrupulous room she was paralyzed with dread and hope and fever dreams.

She sent a quick spurt to turn on the lights, dim, and he caught it, said “No,” and countered her signal to the

room with an electromagnetic tweak. A command from the king.

His pushing through the door into the next room, into her private spaces, sent her fever rising thick and warm into her throat. He reached down and unslipped the side of her suit. It peeled off and she said, "Prehistoric," hoping it would come over as a joke, but as the word left her, she meant it.

"So you are," he answered, moving all over her.

Stress fell away like her negligée. As if she had one on.

The next thing she felt was his hot breath between her legs and an answering O from inside her. O, oh, oh yes, yearning to be a zero. I'll be O and you be...

A fraction, soon gone. Well spent.

She went to work in his division. Her days passed in an aura of sultry air, short of breath, high excited trills echoing in her. The work was good. At meals she ate with many varieties of humans, though here they were mostly Supras. She enjoyed the food and the talk and sometimes she was allowed to speak herself.

She caught fragments of the unspoken, which seemed to comprise most of what was getting said. Someone referred to herself in the unspoken and she caught the phrase "— manages to be naked with her clothes on —" About her, the verb-signifier said. It came with clear Supra uptones but was obliquely a compliment. Or she took it so.

So she worked to fit in. This was easier than she had expected.

The essential trait all types of humans relied on was time-binding. To work in the Library meant labouring in the shadow of Time Itself, after all. So to get a grasp at all took knowing how humans saw the world. Humans of whatever vintage.

The span of a single life was quite great, taking into account the contacts with the old and young, who extended one's reach fore and aft in time. Even among the ancients, in fragile bodies unaided by technology, the span was a few centuries.

Now it was many millennia. Prehistory, back when life was astonishingly short — a few decades! — still had spanned 10,000 generations. In years that was not much. In generations, it was respectable, comparable to the lifetimes of the advanced societies, when people lived aeons and had plenty of time to get bored with their relatives. With their friends. With, sometimes, everything — exit stage left, in haste.

Prehistory had been the great shaping time of primordial, first-form humanity — the Naturals. No surprise, then, that Naturals' own opinions about what was important in life were moulded far more by prehistory than by their trivial experience of early, simple civilization.

From that vast era Naturals got their basic perceptions. Their leaders who understood this went far. Naturals felt best in groups of a hundred or so, and even better if only a few dozen were involved. Hunting parties had been about that size, even for the big, long-extinct game. Many important institutions were of the same rough scale — the ancient village, governing councils of nations, commanding

élites of vast armies, teams playing games, orchestras, family fests. All human enterprises that worked were of that size, and nearly everything that failed was not.

So the Library had to be organized using this bedrock wisdom. Otherwise, it would fail.

Civilization had long maintained the appearance of such communal closeness, in small units people could manage. Societies had evolved that could stack such social nuggets into vaster larger arrays. A squad of ten worked well together, and united with ten other squads could do far more. Those ten who commanded squads could then meet in a room and make up a squad themselves, and so on up a pyramid that could sum the labours of billions.

All this was built on the firm foundation of primate bonding patterns. If the pattern broke down at the bottom, it gave a rabble. Loss of scale at the top led to dictators, who always fell in the long run. Democracy emerged and worked because it let people form groups they could actually manage and like.

The Library was democratic, but. After all, there were dozens of variations on the Great Human Theme in the staff. The Library needed them all because their forms had all contributed to the Library. Fathoming what Library records meant demanded intense co-operation. Every form of human had to be respected. Acknowledged.

Democratic, but. The Supras were still, everybody agreed, the very best.

She started working in serial languages. Easy stuff, suitable for Originals. She could almost hear Kurani thinking that, in her hyperactive imagination.

Serial writings were a persistent human tradition. Many Library workers felt them to be somehow more authentic than the later methods that directly integrated with the nervous system. Dawn had little experience with serials, though. How quaint, she thought at first, even for a Library: to set down symbols one after another and make the eyes (or in one case, the fingers, and another, the nose) manufacture meaning from them, seen one at a time. Piecework.

Nobody did that any more, though of course speech was still serial. No subspecies had ever tried to make the throat and vocal chords perform in the way the eyes could, ferrying vast gouts of information at a glance. Making sound waves do that faced both a bandwidth problem and a fleshy one.

The throat was a string instrument, resonant but limited. Humans could not drink and speak at the same time, a design flaw not shared by the other ancient primates. Yet it was one that nobody had ever overcome. People still strangled at banquets, appropriately dressed in formal gear for their funerals — all due to a faulty collaboration between eating and speaking.

She got interested in serial methods and delved back into the very earliest. The most ancient, the "Arbic" notation, had a shrunken 26 letters, whereas even the ancients knew that something around 40 speech-sounds and phonemes were optimum. The earliest forms even used something she had to struggle to understand — letters with two cases, big and small, with almost no value

added to the doubling of symbols.

Later languages dropped these cultural carbuncles. Down through the myriad millennia, letters assumed shapes to show the position taken by the vocal organs (which varied) in articulating the sounds. Those quickest to draw evoked the most frequent sounds.

She got the idea of serial writing right away. Humans liked the step-by-step nature of stories, narrative momentum, and sentences carried one forward in a pleasurable way.

Still, she was glad to get back into the hohlraum. It was a wondrous tool that shaped itself to her (in-)abilities. Supple, subtle, sly. Deftly it brought her intense, layered knowledge. After reading the serial languages, the hohlraum was like the experience of having read. The memories of the serial texts were there, but reachable instantly at many levels.

The hohlraum flew like a bird over a rumpled landscape, spying all. It could see the geological layers beneath that bore in massive strata the assumptions, histories, and worldviews that slumbered beneath the surface text. It could sense the warp and weave of time, as well. Like conceptual lava, information flowed up to the surface, seeping hot and new, there to cool and congeal into ravines of reasoning and mountains of conclusion. In the long sweep of time those peaks and valleys would in turn crumble, their continental wisdoms collide, rumbling into dust.

All this came into her mind in the slow pace of gravid change, its majesty impressing her. This was the lot of being human over the long eras, in which whole grand cultures were mere mayflies.

She taught herself to not mind when he vanished for days.

Supras did that. They had other concerns, matters lying well beyond her conceptual horizons, yes, yes, she understood that.

It was as if, leaving, he turned out the light. Sex, having come rushing to her out of nowhere, rushed back. She worked.

Then he would return, send her a quirky smile. His tide came roaring back in. Her world blazed.

And when he appeared, it was always first things first. First, as in Original.

She liked his taste, and not merely his skin. He had kept the Original cock, a handsome wick indeed. No efficient Supra rig for him, no. She had seen it all before, of course, and there was to the entire act, up close, the quality of being attacked by a giant, remorseless snail. The whole arrangement seemed on the face of it unlikely, a temporary design that had gotten legislated into concrete. But it worked. Somehow. Wisdom of the ancients. Snail and swamp, who could have guessed?

Nothing was more Original than what humans of all brands called, with unthinking arrogance, *the out of doors* – as if all creation were defined by its location just outside where We lived. Kurani never used the term, but he certainly used the feelings.

He liked weather – the more, the better. They always slept outside when a storm of swollen, angry purple clouds came muscling over the horizon. As the heavens tore at

each other, so did the humans. One powerful night, the thunder and lightning came closer and closer together, each booming roar like a commandment, which they followed to the letter. Afterward they lay exhausted and warm and delightfully sweaty, listening to the storm shoulder its way off into the mountains to command someone else. A cleansing rain began to patter down on the balcony outside with the indescribable rich smell a good rain brought to a fine moment.

“Whoosh! Enough to make you believe in God,” he said.

“Or that we and the weather are geared together.”

“Same thing.”

It wasn’t all about sex, either.

She firmly believed that people had, as a species, an innate drive to mesh with others – that the sense of self emerged from a web of intimate relations. The Supras seemed to feel all humans were the outcome of impersonal drives like sex and envy, plus others they could not speak about very well. Maybe they didn’t want to reveal too much. Kurani sometimes shrugged, that most hal-
lowed of gestures, as if to convey the gulf between them.

She clung to the precipice of that gulf, and sometimes threw herself across. Or tried.

Yet she knew already that love could fade. Not so much on its own, but from efforts of the people experiencing it – so intensely as to, well, to kill it. Love made many naked, unsettled by longing. The pressure was always there. And oppositely, some felt too safe in a relationship and fantasized about something more racy. It was terribly confusing.

Famously, Naturals longed for the touch of Arts, the earliest artificial forms. She felt some of this herself. The earliest human artifice lay in self-decoration – the attraction of the human assembly. Kurani termed this the lure of simple skin: parts fitting together under a fleshy wrap that served all the chores of clothes but renewed itself. She had always been tantalized by the externals, but rumour had it among her Meta that the internals were the truly amazing portion of Art anatomy.

Well, maybe she would get around to them. There were very few humans recreated from the eras when human organs were shaped for artistic ends; only two in the Library. That variety had been quickly supplanted with better designs. Not of the Supra grade, but superior. Still, most such experimental forms after the earliest Arts were extinct. Fashion had its role to play, as well.

The longest-running human game lay not in self-ornamentation, but relationships. Kurani taught her a calmer way of looking at these things. This was his way of explaining what Dawn and he were about, under the covers.

In his view, the true deep human fantasy was the conviction of safety. Men believed their women were devoted, wives that their men were dependable. Both ignored contrary evidence. Both acted to fulfil the other’s belief. When the whole collusive contrivance collapsed, each cried, “This is not the person I thought!” They had merely gotten trapped in the quicksand of protective grey each laid to trim the rampaging velocity of romantic love.

Even sex could develop this deadening, out of self-defence. Without a dull patina it was too vivid to sustain

for long, dragging one into surrenders, losses of self, immersion in the rhythms and sensations of another. "Same reverse twist for aggression," he added cryptically.

She nodded. Love scared anyone. We primates reacted to threat with anger, so we got into fights without knowing why.

Dawn countered this with her simple sense that the Other should be an ideal mate. She felt better when she let herself see Kurani as more handsome and valuable than others thought him to be. Her dream man, personified in Kurani, would not let time or routine lessen the intensity of authentic experience. "You keep building sand castles even though you know the tide's coming in."

Their days were simple: work, study, love, sleep, then back to work. Sometimes love came right after work, even before dinner. And sometimes she thought that her need for love was really a mask over her desire for, well, sex.

But when she was in that moment, it was not so much like lust as it was like worship. Maybe what she sought in love was only symbolized by sex, and at the same time made real – something far more powerful: completion.

He had done this many times, she was sure of it. People routinely lived several centuries, and Kurani was even older. He had literally forgotten more than she knew.

One day he took her by the hand and led her into a disused corridor of the Library. He stood at one end far away, a tiny figure – and whispered words of unexpected tenderness that roared along the walls, amplified somehow by ancient acoustics. Into her ears came cherished phrases, ones she was sure she would remember all her life. The secret of these acoustic amplifiers had been long lost. But he knew just how to use it.

He was vast, yet he loved her, too – she knew this with granite conviction. She knew also that to him she must be a familiar type. Electrically primitive, but exhausting. She used that. She seduced him with her intensity, her one-plus-some personality. But she also unnerved him with the instant intimacy she offered, able to turn it on in the pivot of a second.

Their days were electric for her, in the vast Library, labouring in the long dry valley rimmed by snowcapped peaks. Her world was crisp and sure for the first time. Intoxicating, just to breathe the cutting air.

First loves were the fiercest, she realized. So it couldn't last. Fair enough. But there was nothing stopping her working on that.

And she was, right up until the attack.

The furies came in a savage, fire-bright moment.

It began with strange droplets coasting on the air, shimmering, murmuring. Floodlights had ringed a grey, chipped slab, where she worked with Kurani. They were opening out a repository of relicts from a time when inter-dimensional transport was possible. How, nobody knew. The repository was described in a curious string of phrases from a long-dead language. There were spherical iso-boxes too-long-duration containers from a society, Kurani said, that had reached the peak of mathematical wisdom – or so the meta-historians said.

The floating, humming motes distracted her. Unlike

the familiar micro tech that pervaded the Library, performing tasks, these shifted and scintillated in the hard spotlight glare.

Kurani ignored them. His powers of concentration were vast and pointed. He had just discovered that these ancient people had used numbers not as nouns or adjectives, but to modify verbs, words of action. Instead of "see those three trees," they would say something like, "the living things manifesting treeness here act visibly as a collection divided to the extent of four."

And somehow this referred to the iso-boxes. Which brimmed with an odd glow.

She studied Kurani's furrowed brow as he struggled with this conceptual gulf. These ancients had used number systems that recognized three bases – 10, 12 and 5 – and were rooted in the body, with its five toes and six fingers. So grounded in the flesh, what insights did the ancients reach in far more rarefied pursuits? Scholars had already found a deep fathoming of the extra dimensions known to exist in the universe. The slab before Dawn and Kurani spoke of experiments in dimensional transport, all rendered in a strangely canted manner.

But the motes... As she recalled the fracturing moment, suddenly she looked up at a new source of light. The motes were tumbling in a field of amber glitter. Sharp blue shards of brilliance lanced into her eyes. The motes were not micro tech but *windows* into another place, where hard radiance rumbled and fought.

It all came from the iso-boxes. They contained some link to higher dimensions, she guessed, and when opened unleashed them.

She had turned to Kurani to warn him –

– and the world was sliced. Cut into thin parallel sheets, each showing a different part of Kurani, sectioned neatly by a mad geometer.

But this was not illusion, not a mere refraction in the air. He was divided, slashed crosswise. She could see into his red interior, organs working, pulsing. She stepped toward him –

Then came the fire, hot pain, and screaming. She remembered running. The motes swept after her, and she was trying to get away from the terrible screams. Only when she gasped for breath did she realize that the screams had come from her.

She had turned then, looking back down a long stony corridor that tapered to infinity – and Kurani was at the other end, not running. Impaled on a blade of light. Sliced. Writhing.

And to her shame, she had turned and run away. Without a backward glance. Terrified.

After, the memory always came sharply into her. The bare fossil outlines of later events swelled up, filling her throat, the past pressing to get out.

Finding a dozen of a neighbouring Meta cowering in a passageway, fidgeting with fear. They had to shout themselves hoarse in the thundering violence.

Then the booming eased away. Crackling energies came instead.

The other Originals said the dimensional attacks raged

through all the valleys of the Library. They were being pursued by things beyond comprehension. Let the Supras fight it if they could.

They would be hunted like rats here. She agreed – they had to get out, into the forest.

The seething air in the passageway became prickly. A sound like fat frying grew near. No one could stand and wait for it.

She went down a side tunnel. The other Originals fled toward the main passage. Better to run and hide alone, than in a straggling rabble. But the tunnel ceiling got lower as she trotted, then walked, finally duck-walked.

She cowered far back in the tunnel, alone in blackness. Stabs of virulent lightning forked in the distance and splashed the tunnel walls with an ivory glow. Getting closer. In one of the flashes she saw tiny designs in the tunnel wall. Her fingers found the pattern. Ancient, a two-tiered language. A... combination? Plan?

She extruded a finger into a tool wedge and tracked along the grooves. It was telling a tale of architectural detail she could not follow very well, reading at high speed through the tool. A sense-phrase in the middle of an extended brag about the design referred to an inlet or maybe outlet (a two-valence, anyway). Where?

More snapping flashes, emerald now. Nearer. Could they hear her?

She inched further into the tunnel. Her head bumped the ceiling; the rough bore was narrowing. In another quick glimmer, followed by an electrical snarl, she saw a web of symbol-tracks, impossible to follow. *So damn much history! Where's the door?*

She scrunched further in. The web tapered down into a shallow track and she got her finger wedge in. *Ah! Codes.* She twisted, probed – and the wall flopped open into another tunnel.

She crawled through, trying to be quiet. A glowing brown snake was coming down the tunnel. She slammed the curved hatch in its face.

Pitch black. At least the lightning had shown her what was going on. She sat absolutely still. Faint thunder and a trembling in the floor. This tunnel was round and – a soft breeze.

She crawled toward it. Not even height to duck-walk. The slight wind got stronger. Cool to her fevered brow.

Smells: dust, leaves? A dull thump behind her. She hurried, banging her knees –

– and spilled halfway out into clear air. Above, stars. A drop of about her height, onto dirt. She reversed and dropped to the ground. Dirt. Flashes to the left. She went right.

She ran. Snapping crashes behind her. Dim shapes up ahead. Trees? A rising sucking sound behind. A brittle thrust of amber fire rushed over her left shoulder and shattered into a bush – exploding it into flames.

Trees – she dodged left. Faint screams somewhere.

The sucking sound again.

Into the trees, heels digging in hard. On the horizon the very sky was being sliced, veins opened. She could see into something red and sullen beyond, the sky of a world.

Another amber bolt, this time roasting the air near her.

It veered up and ignited a crackling bower of fronds.

Screams getting louder. Up ahead? Glows there. She went right, down a gully, splashing across a stream. Not deep enough to cover her.

A spark sizzled down from the air into the trees up ahead. She went left and found a wall of brambles. Distant flickering gave her enough light to pick her way along, gasping. Around the brambles, into thick trees. She crossed the stream again. Deeper here. Downstream went back toward the open, toward the Library. She ran upstream. The sucking rush came stealing up behind. She dodged, ducked, dodged. *Stay near the stream.* If the water got deeper –

The pain swarmed over her and pushed her into blackness.

Later, she set out to search the forest further for bodies. This gave her strength despite what she dreaded finding.

She had enjoyed no steady lover, male or female, but she knew the other Originals who had worked in the Library. They had sported an ironic humour about their roles as Originals among the Supras, playing the role of the least gifted but well honoured surviving strains of primordial humans. There had been many wry jokes between them.

Not that she had been immune, of course. She had gloried in her affair with Kurani, been whispered about and envied and criticized, even insulted. Enormous fun.

The anonymous charred remains she found were a blessing, in a way. The fury was quite thorough. None had been left to rot. She could not identify them.

She searched systematically through the afternoon, finding only more scorched bodies. Even as she worked, she knew this was helping her. Better to act, not think.

Finally she stood looking down into a broad valley, tired, job done, planning where to go next. Alone.

"I trust you are all right," a deep voice said behind her.

Dawn whirled. A tall, blocky man stood on the outer deck of a brass-coloured craft that balanced silently in the air.

He had come upon her from behind without her noticing and this, more than his size and the silent power of his craft, told Dawn that she had no chance of getting away. Blinking against the sun glare, she saw that this was a Supra.

Another. It all came rushing up into her again, the smothered pain. Kurani.

And she put it away. There would be a time to feel it and that time was not now. The longing and passion had been part of becoming a young woman, a time she would treasure. Wondrous. That was over and she knew with a leaden suddenness that it would not come again. She could not let it.

And this Supra – why did he survive? When my love died?

Her head spun with wild emotions. She hated this Supra, she needed him, she wanted him to fold her in his long arms and take away the anguish.

Then she made herself put all that away, as well. Concentrate, the way Kurani did. *See what is before you.*

He carried all the advanced signatures: Big glossy eyes. Scalloped ears that could turn to capture sound. Enlarged

trachea to help food bypass the windpipe better. Forward-tilted upper torso, lessening pressure on the spine. Backward-curved neck with bigger vertebrae, counter-balancing the close-ribbed chest. His casual amble along the deck of the flyer told her that his knees could bend backward, muting the grind of bones in sockets. Heavier bones, thicker skull, an angular, glinting intelligence in the face.

The sight of him brought rushing back her memories of Kurani. This man was slightly different, muscles lean and planar, but of the same design-era. She gazed at him, the yearning welling in her, and she forced it down. And after what seemed to her like forever, forced out some words. "I... yes, I am."

He smiled affably. "One of our scouts finally admitted that it was not sure all the bodies it saw were dead. I am happy I decided to check its work."

As he spoke his ship settled gently near Dawn and he stepped off without glancing at the ground. Despite his bulk he moved with unconscious, springy lightness. She noted abstractly that he used *I*, which Kurani seldom did. Until now she had never wondered why.

She gestured behind her. "You came to bury my kind?"

"If necessary. I would rather save them."

"Too late for that."

He nodded as several emotions flickered across his face – sadness, regret, firm resolve. "The scouts reported some bodies, but all had been burned. You are all I have found – delightfully alive."

Delightfully? The word was almost flirtatious. His calm mildness was maddening. "Where *were* you Supras? They – it, something from another dimension – hounded us! Tracked us! Killed us all!"

Again his face showed a quick succession of emotions, each too fleeting for her to read before the next crowded in. Still he said nothing, though his mouth became a tight line and his eyes moistened. He gestured at a pall of smoke that still climbed on the far horizon.

Dawn followed his movement and said severely, "I guessed you had to defend your own, but couldn't you have, have..."

Her voice trailed away when she saw the pained twinge constricting his face as her words struck home.

Then his mouth thinned again and he nodded. "All along the Library valleys the dimensional cut destroyed. One cannot tell whether the effect was a true attack, or a left-over from antiquity."

Her anger, stilled for a moment by his vulnerability, returned like an acrid burn in the back of her throat. "We had nothing to defend ourselves!"

"Did you think we had weapons?"

"Supras have everything!"

He sighed. "Few were useful. We protect through our valiantly labouring machines, through the genius of our past. These failed."

She felt an abyss between herself and this man. As a Supra he had probably lived centuries; disaster was not news any more, apparently.

"I am Fanak," he said, as though anyone would know who he was. His casual confidence told her even more than the name, for he was well known. She responded to his

questions about the last few days with short, precise answers. She had rarely seen Supras, growing up. Kurani had come as a revelation. Apparently he had been unusual; this one was not winning her over.

But as they rose with smooth acceleration Dawn gaped, not attempting to hide her surprise. Within moments she saw the lands where she had lived and laboured reduced to a mere spot in a vastly larger canvas. As a young girl she had flown this high, but now the magnitude of the Supras' latest labours became obvious. She watched the mountains she had admired as a girl reduced to foot soldiers in an army that marched around the curve of the world.

Her Meta had known well the green complexity of the forests, but now many fresh, thin brown rivers flowed through narrow canyons, cutting. These gave the mountain range the look of a knobby spine from which many nerves trailed into the tan deserts beyond. A planetary spinal axis, as though the Earth itself had a mind. She wondered if in some sense this could be so.

Brilliant snowcaps crowned the tallest peaks, but these were not, she saw, the source of the countless rivers. Each muddy rivulet began abruptly high in a canyon, swelling as it ran through rough slopes. The many waterfalls and deep gullies told her that each was busily digging itself in deeper, fresh and energetic.

Dawn pointed and before she could ask Fanak said, "We feed them from tunnels. The great Millennium Lakes lie far underground here."

This land sculpting was only millennia old, but already moist wealth had reclaimed much of the planet's dry mid-continent. Fanak sat back as he silently ordered his ship to perform a long turn, showing them the expanses. She caught a brilliant spark of polished metal far away on the very curve of the planet.

"We will rebuild. Replacing you Originals will be the most difficult part."

"Just so nothing like that *ever* gets out again," she said.

Below them the Earth sprawled large with many places to hide. But perhaps not, for humans.

The day labour of reconstruction at least tired her muscles, though not her mind. She had several sleepless nights. Then Fanak invited her to a festivity – a "fratung," implying restrained revelry; Dawn had to look up the word.

The invitation came out of nowhere, a message on her inboards. Phrased more like a summons than an invitation, but thrilling all the same. A Supra event! She felt a quickening in herself and did not quite know why.

It was in an ornate structure that rose from the valley floor like a luminous wave about to break. Electro-lifts took her up into it, past ascending slabs, precise parabolas of arcing orange fountains, a welter of buttresses and columns, some invisible but sensed. Sculptures she recognized as vastly ancient hovered in illuminated spaces. Some were empire-style, with noble brows eyeing infinite prospects, while others evoked landscapes that could not be Earthly. Colossal battles were caught frozen at their climax, a huge holocrystal showing the later phases of

the era in contrast. This was time-sculpture, she recalled, a craft sometimes confused with real history. Propaganda of sufficient age became art.

Fanak greeted her with an embrace, signalling that this was Not Work, in case an Original did not grasp the concept. She gave him a twist of a smile in return, and caught from him a musk that told her more than she wanted to know just now.

Frowning, she put the moment aside. They were alone – easy to do in the labyrinth of cool columns and moist recesses – and she saw that the building knew him but not her. A steady glow followed Fanak, an attendant glow that enhanced him in a ruddy nimbus. It drew him subtly out of the surrounding gloom as the embedded intelligences here tracked his eye movements. Answering light sprang forth to illuminate whatever interested him. At the moment, that was her. This radiance, she saw, framed him for her as well, making him loom masterfully.

All intended for her. She would have to disregard it.

He showed her the view from a wall that seemed to ooze away... showing the plain below, the sprawling devastation of the Library, ramparts of mountains rising to an azure sky. "Here," he said, and in a twinkling the floor, too, seeped away under her feet. Despite herself and her resolve to Not Be Impressed, she gave a quiet gasp.

The plain worked with patterns – shot with light, humming with purpose, alive beneath the sands. She was seeing the dumb physical world above, and beneath, the living intelligences that lay embedded in this ancient valley. All of it was aware, sentient in some sense. And –

"Beautiful," she sighed. "So much..."

"This is how I think of the far past," Fanak said with a studied, casual air.

"Buried..."

"Yes. Patterns laid down long ago, giving forth a view of the world we cannot fully comprehend. Beyond the mere slabs and indices we study. Huge."

"To know it... how can we?"

"I thought to show it to you, just to make plain that there is much the Ancients" – he made the capital obvious with his tone – "gave us. Things large and subtle."

"If they could make this, then..."

"It is all we can know of them."

"Another recording."

"Perhaps. Or an intelligence we cannot grasp."

She turned to him, close now, feeling his presence like an aroma. "Do we *know* that?"

He smiled, slow and ambiguous. "Of course not. Nothing at such a remove, across hundreds of millions of years, can be sure."

He led her across a plaza and directly into a pond of water. He did not hesitate and the water firmed up under his step. She had jerked back, and now hastened to catch up, her shoes finding a cushioned surface almost like skin. They crossed this and stepped off onto stone, and the pond reverted to water behind them. She looked back at it, but of course Fanak did not.

And here came the Supra crowd. As they entered a long hall a frisson went through the stately figures that were

dining from floating tables. Fanak stopped to survey the room, opened his jacket and put his hands on his hips. She had seen this in her own kind, making the silhouette loom suddenly larger and more forbidding; or so it had been in the forest.

The effect seemed the same here. Fanak was a man of social stature and lesser Supras, she noted, lingered around the periphery. She immediately guessed why: they were hoping to renew alliances and gain new friends, without challenging the Fanaks at the centre of the room.

And they were at the centre, socially and geometrically. She felt a flush of pleasure at the attention she got, merely as his companion. Frank speculation worked in the surrounding faces. Pursed lips on the women, especially. Dawn was unique, but still an Original. Some faces plainly said that, after all, peacocks do not show their feathers for dogs.

Passing a couple, she heard, "What I cannot create I do not understand." A laugh. "This I know; someone cooked up an Original soup, I'm told."

Followed immediately by, "Isn't it always that way?"

Then, "Can't let them out without supervision, can we?"

And, "Domesticated, they are quite nice."

Dawn wheeled on them. "What I do not create I do not appreciate," she spat back. And stalked away. Not a bad exit, she thought.

She turned to the food – a welcome escape. Meat without bones, skin, gristle or fat – because it was made somewhere from elemental compounds, not grown in nature. Eggs innocent of the belly of a bird. She ate a bit, trying to suppress the anxiety seeping up in her. No help – she cast aside a delicacy, took a sip of fogwine, fumed, turned back into the crowd.

"Let's... let's go back out," she implored Fanak.

He instantly caught her embarrassment. "Of course."

In the darkness above the valley she sighed with relief. "I'm really not up to all this."

He slid his arms around her, while still looking outward at the view. "You can be."

The pulse of him was immediate. She looked into his face and could not get her breath. Only moments before she had seen the Supras as much like her kind, but now the difference between them welled up in her, pulse quickening from both fear and desire in equal measures. She remembered Kurani and the leaping, sudden passion, wanted it to be that way again, to be caught up and carried downstream, sweaty and joyful and possessed by something greater –

– and she pushed him away. "I... I can't."

He hid his feelings behind a formal, "I see. I am sorry."

"No, don't be, it's me, really." Hands in the air, trying to express something beyond words.

"I assumed..."

"Maybe I'm not... ready." That wasn't right, there was something worse brewing in her, but she could not say what it was.

"I am sorry."

He turned away and she bolted for the safety of the Supra crowd within. Her heels clicked anxiously, echoes from the high stone walls taunting her. She hurried into

the long hall, steps ahead of Fanak, and abruptly stopped at the entrance.

And she could not say why.

So she stepped without thinking into a crowd of them – immersed in a pale yellow mist. It clung to her as she passed through them and felt in the air a ghostly silence. It clung to her and she moved among the Supras – who were saying things aloud and in Talent-talk, but somehow distantly, as though she was at the other end of the room from them in a fashion she could not quite fathom. They did not look directly at her but knew she was there. She breathed in the yellow fog and felt a gathering tension. So she... yawned.

This caught their attention. They looked at her for a long moment as she felt suddenly vulnerable, her jaw wide and mouth gaping like a fool.

Had she ever seen a Supra yawn? No. In school hadn't she read somewhere? – and here came the inboard reference-seeker, which whispered that *yawning seemed to be a way of communicating changing environmental or internal conditions to others, possibly as a way to synchronize behaviour, most likely a vestigial mechanism that has lost its significance in selection. Supras have omitted the reflex* – and she shut it off, sharp, for now those near her were smiling, some with hands held over mouths, not wanting to laugh.

She turned and fled from the obliging yellow fog, from the ripple of stifled laughter that followed her out of the crowd like a wave.

She breathed in the air, laced with something she had never savoured before. All about her, the party swirled. Supras, Ur-humans, many variants in between – all from different eras in the aeon-long explorations of evolution. She escaped onto a parapet. Below stretched the eroded valley, ancient beyond measure.

She felt it come rushing up at her. This desert plain was a baked-dry display table covered with historical curiosities. What vexed currents worked, when different ages sought to conspire! And she was pinned here, firmly spiked by the bland, all-powerful, infuriating, unthinkingly condescending *reasonableness* of the Supras.

Dawn pressed her palms to her ears. The din of Talent-talk drummed on. Some point was in contention, laced in logics she could not follow. As soon as they got through with their labyrinthine logic, they would notice her again.

Notice. And talk down to her. Reassure her. Treat her like a vaguely remembered pet.

No wonder they had not recalled the many varieties of dogs and cats, she thought bitterly. Ur-humans had served that purpose quite nicely.

There was no one here who was... her. Her people... Hard River Meta and all the others. All gone. They had laboured for the Supras since far, time-shrouded antiquity, tending the flowering biosphere. The Supras had known enough to let them form tribes, to work their own small will upon the forest. But drawn out of that fragile matrix, Dawn gasped like a beached fish.

The Talent-talk drummed, drummed, drummed.

She staggered away, anger clouding her vision. Conflicts that had been building in her burst forth, and she

hoped the blizzard of Talent-talk hid them. But she could avoid them no longer herself.

Even Kurani – she had felt with him a near-equality, yes. And that had made her earlier passion possible – born, she saw now, of her innocence. And her ignorance of their differences. An innocence, an ignorance she had lost now.

She was like a bug here, scuttling at the feet of these distracted supermen. They were kind enough in their cool, lopsided fashion, but their effort to damp their abilities down to her level was visible – and galling. Longing for her own kind brimmed in her.

– drummed-drummed-drummed –

Her only hope of seeing her kind again lay in these Supras. But a clammy fear clasped her when she tried to think what fresh Ur-humans would be like.

Laboratory-made. Bodies decanted from some chilly crucible. Her relatives, yes, even clones of her. But strangers. Unmarked by life, unrealed. They would be her people only in the narrow genetic sense.

And she would be bound to them in a kind of genetic slavery. She and all of her kind would be kindly, politely owned by the Supras.

She saw suddenly that her Meta, her Mom, her mysterious father who might yet be alive somewhere – they had all been kept in benign ignorance. The Supras clearly felt that Originals could not be actors on the interstellar stage.

And maybe they were right. But she resented the idea. In her gut she felt that Originals could matter, if they had a chance.

And somewhere, maybe some Ur-humans lived. Maybe her father. They would know the tribal intimacies, the shared culture she longed for.

If they existed, she had to find them.

Yet every nuance of the Supras' talk suggested that they would not let her go. *Domesticated, they are quite nice.*

Could she...?

They were not all-powerful – she had to keep reminding herself of that. Yet their very attainments gave them vulnerabilities. Immortals were enormously cautious; accident could still destroy them. Caution could err.

And they could have missed some of her kind in the dense woods.

She sucked in a chilly breath. Things slid into place, deep inside.

Very well, then. She would escape.

So began the next great human age.

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Malicious Springs

Tanith Lee

They were rowed across the lake. It was like milky blue-green-grey silk, and nothing on it but tiny islands green-meshed in trees, and far over there, a line of ducks cutting a white wake.

"There's something in the water," said Mr Perkins, the guy who was rowing the boat.

Everyone but Jacob stared over the side at the lake.

"Where?" asked Elaina. Then, "What?"

Mr Perkins said, "No, not that."

Bill was still interested. He said to Jacob, "Hey." But Jacob only wagged his tail. Elaina laughed. And Dad said, "You mean like the Loch Ness Monster, Mr Perkins?" In that cool, ironic tone that annoyed so many people.

Mr Perkins though was impervious. He said, "I'm only repeating what I heard. The last lot stayed at the house, they said there was something in the water and it ought to be reported. They left early. Maybe they did report it. But no one took no notice."

"Well, have *you* seen anything, Mr Perkins? Your house is only across over there, isn't it, by the farm. Surely you might have? When you were fishing, perhaps."

"Don't go fishing," said Mr Perkins. "Don't hold with it."

Silence returned. Mr Perkins had driven them up from the station, then through the village, allowing them a halt at the village shop for provisions, finally loaded their bags into the boat, and helped them in too. Elaina could have managed without any help, Shaw, (Dad) was a bit clumsy. Bill and Jacob scrambled in, in a tangle of arms, legs and paws. Mr Perkins was that strange combination

of taciturn and chatty. Half an hour would pass without a word, then came some burst of information. "That's the church, see. Twelfth-century that is. There's the road to the shore. Lovely views." And now this about *something* in the water.

Bill peered down through the milky surface of the lake. His ten-year-old eyes were clear enough, the lake less so. He couldn't make out anything much – only some weed, floating. Not even fish.

But in a way it was a relief to have something else to think about. On the train, next in the car, all pressed together, he and Jacob and Elaina in the back, and Dad, the slightly-well-known writer, sitting by Mr Perkins. Awkward.

It wasn't that Bill didn't like Elaina. She was friendly, pretty and quite young, at least nine years younger than Dad, and Dad had been much happier, less cold and pre-occupied, since she had become part of his life. But Elaina was – awkward. She was so determined not to try to *take his mother's place* with Bill, that it made both Bill and herself uneasy. The holiday here, at this rented house by the lake, was for Dad to settle down and finish the latest novel. And for them all to "spend time together." Bill assumed too this was a dress-rehearsal for Shaw and Elaina – and Bill – living together permanently. Or at least until something else happened as it had three years ago, when Mum had dumped both Shaw and Bill, and left, as Shaw put it, "On a fucking jet-plane."

"There's the house up there, see," announced Mr Perkins.

"The white one? Oh yes," cried Elaina, "I recognize it from the brochure."

"Nice house that. Eighteenth-century."

"And it has, let's see, an acre of apple orchard, its own well, and an oak staircase with carved bannister," finished Elaina.

Shaw smiled. "What do you think, Bill?"

"Looks good," said Bill, encouragingly. It seemed all right, the house, perched up there over the trees. He wondered if it would be possible to spot the Lake Ness Monster from those bay windows at the front. It looked a steepish climb to get there, and Dad would get out of breath and try to pretend he hadn't.

When the boat grounded on the pebbles below the steps, Jacob shot off like a black and brown rocket.

"Jake! Come back!" yelled Shaw, waving his arms in panic. "Bloody dog – he'll have himself lost."

But Jacob only ran up into the trees, barked a bit, then ran back grinning, to see why the rest of his pack was taking so long to join him.

By early evening, they had, Shaw said, claimed their terrain. Elaina, who seemed to like domestic stuff, had made up the beds, and generally reorganized the house, moving couches, scattering extra cushions, arranging candles, putting flowers into vases. Now she was constructing hamburgers from local meat, while Shaw dealt with the salad and cooled two bottles of white wine in the fridge.

Bill did like the house. It had two storeys, with four large rooms and kitchen and scullery on the ground floor and two winding corridors upstairs, in some parts going up an extra two or three steps, that rambled through another set of rooms.

The views of the lake were wonderful. Even Bill, the pragmatist, could see they were, but best of all, the windows seemed perfect for monster-spotting. Dad's chosen "study" above, however, looked inland to the orchard. "I have to keep my eyes on the computer keys, Bill. The lake's too interesting. But you and Elaina must go for lots of walks." At which Elaina and Bill glanced uncomfortably at each other, and then beamed, to show how great that would be.

Dad was selfish. Bill knew that because Shaw had often said so. "I'm a writer. It makes you selfish."

Jacob loved the orchard. He and Bill had run about there for an hour, then come in thirsty. Elaina, efficiently, already had Jacob's water-bowl down and filled, and a large orange juice in the fridge for Bill. Shaw washed lettuce and tomatoes at the stone sink. Bill opened a jar of green olives and hooked out two. He noticed Jacob staring at him. Jacob had that funny look in his eyes he got sometimes. Then he sneezed and ran out of the open scullery door, across the little yard there, and back into the orchard.

"That dog is possessed," said Shaw. He sometimes took pride in Jacob's eccentricities.

"You're wrong," said Elaina, "he just likes to be in a big garden for a change."

Bill could see Jacob. He hadn't gone far. He seemed to be jumping about in a rather odd way. Then he came

bounding back, grinning, rushed into the kitchen and leapt straight up on the surface where Elaina was working at the hamburgers.

Everyone yelled. Elaina shrieked with outraged surprise as Jacob wolfishly ripped a chunk of the compressed meat from her hand. Then like a whirlwind, Jacob fled back out of the door.

"Are you all *right*? He didn't bite you, did he?"

"No – no – it just –"

"He doesn't do that kind of thing."

Bill wanted to laugh, but didn't. Elaina still looked slightly upset, as if maybe this had happened because she had offended Jacob. She took things too personally. If he had been able, Bill would gently have explained that to her.

"Well, that dog gets no supper tonight," proclaimed Shaw. "I said he's possessed. He acts half the time as though he has a through-line to some sort of deranged dog-god."

Now Elaina laughed, and relaxed. "It's OK. There's lots left. What he stole will do him more good than canned dog-food."

"Don't make excuses for the brute."

Jacob, disgraced, didn't return. The humans sat to eat in the last summery light, out on the honeysuckled veranda at the front of the house. Golden sparkles crystallised the lake, and long shadows spread purple there from the tree-hung islets. Nothing rose save a single duck, wheeling away into the westering sun.

"It's beautiful here," said Elaina.

They agreed the food was good. The hot meat and crusty bread from the local shop were first-class. The salad too, though Bill had managed to avoid most of that. The French wine also seemed to do Elaina and Shaw good, as it usually did. Bill drank his orange juice, wondering with fond contempt what it was adults liked so much about booze. Pretty awful he thought it, the couple of times they had let him try.

"More salad, Bill? Thought not. I'll get coffee. Then I think showers and bed."

Unimpressed by talk of showers, Bill considered the idea of coffee. He didn't get that either very often, but at least it was a drink worth having.

In the night, Bill woke up and heard them arguing. This hadn't happened before, not with Elaina, though she had once or twice stayed at the house in London. With Mum it had happened more or less non-stop, ending in the time she flung a kettle of just-off boiling water at Dad. He had dodged most of it, but by the time Shaw and Bill got back from the hospital, Mum was gone for good.

So Bill didn't like the sound of a row. He lay rigid, in the holiday bed, between the clean sheets, with a white moon shining in at the thin curtains, and no Jacob to grab hold of.

"I tell you you're too young to understand, you silly little bitch."

"Shaw – if I'm so fucking *young* – what am I doing with you?"

Oh Christ, thought Bill. Please stop it. Please God, make them stop.

Perhaps God, busy though He must be, had a moment, because now the voices went lower, kinder. "Shit, Elly. Sorry. I don't know. I'm just tired – and that book – you know the trouble I'm having with Chapter Seven."

"OK. It's all right. Sweetie, you know I love you?"

Then murmurs too low to decipher. Presently the carefully quiet-because-Bill-may-hear sounds of loving sex. Bill didn't ever mind those, even though they were as alien to him as Mars. They were happy, even funny, sounds. It was just arguments he didn't like. They – scared him. "Thanks, God." Bill was a polite boy.

About two hours later, when the dawn was starting to drift from the land towards the lake, another noise – much louder and weirder – woke everyone.

Bill sat upright, and when he heard his father charging down the stairs with Elaina behind him, Bill sprang up and also ran in the same direction.

Back in London, Jacob never stayed out at night. He slept with Bill, usually. Here, as the dog hadn't returned, despite Elaina's cooing from the scullery yard, they had left him to it. Even Bill did that, since he trusted Jacob to be invincible. And now, Jacob *was* back. He had got in, they reasoned, at a window left ajar in the front room. After which he reached the kitchen, and was currently throwing himself at the fridge door. On the stone floor nearby, his water-bowl lay broken in pieces, water pooling dark as blood.

"Jesus – Shaw – you don't think he's *rabid*, do you?"

"I hope not. We're not supposed to have it over here. Jacob – *calm* down – what the hell's the *matter*?"

Jacob stopped bouncing at the fridge door. He turned insane glowing eyes upon them and let out a crackling yowl.

"Maybe he's hurt –"

"Don't go to him, El, let me do it."

Bill said in a high desperate voice, "Dad, open the fridge."

"– *what*?"

"He wants something out of the fridge."

"Don't be crazy. He's not some kid with hunger pangs – he's a dog –"

"Hang on," said Elaina. "Let's just see." She sidled by Jacob, who let her, abruptly looking more worried than dangerous, wagging his tail as she pulled open the door. Then she threw herself back as Jacob leapt once more, straight up against the packed compartment.

"He's after the bloody hamburgers again –"

Jacob's long paws and long nose flailed in amongst ketchup and salads. The half-filled second wine bottle, left from dinner, teetered at the onslaught. It tilted slowly, pondering whether to fall out or not. Then fell. It smashed on the floor, and wine spread in another puddle.

Jacob slid from the fridge, lowered his head and lapped up the wine.

"Jake – *stop* that – it's full of broken glass. What's the matter with the stupid fool –" Shaw now had Jacob by the collar, hauling him away. Jacob, docile, tail-wagging, permitted this. Shaw sat on a kitchen chair, holding Jacob's head between his hands, staring in Jacob's liquid eyes. "My God, we have an alcoholic dog."

"I'm off for a walk around the lake. May visit the farm

shop. Want to come?"

Bill glanced dubiously at Elaina, all bright, trying in to be a good friend but *not* in his mother's place. Hovering at the breakfast table, Shaw was looking miserable, wanting, or afraid, to get back to his difficult Chapter Seven. There had been another row. A quick flash-flood of one. About the bloody muesli. And Bill had sat there, his mouth dry as bone. Only Jacob, cool and reasonable once more and leaning on Bill's leg, helped him keep together. Now he would have to act like he wanted to go with Elaina. "Sure," he said, smiling radiantly. "Can Jacob come?"

"He'd better," said Elaina. "He needs some fresh air for that hangover."

Outside, as they started off along the brow of the hill, Jacob – not at all hungover – bounding through the trees, tall grass and wild flowers, Elaina paused. "Bill, you know it's OK with Shaw and me? I know it's rotten to hear us shout like that – don't know why we did – but we don't mean it. Bill, we *like* each other, your Dad and me. OK?"

"OK," said Bill. She was a nice woman, trying to reassure him. But he had seen their eyes – like Jacob's, actually, when he thieved the hamburger, or when he knocked the bottle out of the fridge. Going upstairs to clean his teeth, Bill has passed Shaw's study. Shaw stood by his computer, drinking from a half bottle of whisky. Seeing Bill see, Shaw shrugged guiltily. "Swift nip, sir, prior to embarkation on writer's block." Bill had nodded and gone on to the bathroom. He hadn't seen Shaw drink like that in the morning since the Mum days.

Though Bill conscientiously cleaned his teeth, he hadn't showered. Last night he hadn't taken a bath, either, though one had been run for him. In London he was fairly strict with himself, but here – well, it was a holiday. He didn't stink yet. He used the bottle of Evian to rinse his mouth of toothpaste, as they did at home. He had meant to get a cup of coffee off Shaw this morning, but the row had prevented that. So it had just been juice. If this farm shop was any good, he might persuade Elaina to buy him some Pepsi.

The walk was fine, at first. Oak trees splashed up green into the blue sky. The red flowers in the grass were poppies, apparently, and the pink-white ones ox-eye daisies.

Jacob too seemed fine now. It was all fine.

Then, without warning, Elaina started to cry.

This was worse because at first she tried to hide it, then she pretended she wasn't, then she said, "Sorry, Bill. Shit, really sorry. I'm all right. Sorry, Bill."

Bill remembered his mother, crying. Drunk and crying. Slapping Dad. And Dad shouting, and then crying too. Dad drinking whisky. And then the boiled water flying through the air, and Dad shaking with shock, trying to drive safely to A and E. And saying to a nurse, "Dropped the bloody kettle. Stupid."

Jacob found a rabbit. Jacob chased the rabbit.

"For fuck's sake leave it alone – that fucking dog – I'll *kill* it –"

"That's Jacob –"

"I know who it fucking – look – do you want to see a rabbit chomped right there in the grass in front of you? *I* don't."

"He won't. He won't catch up."

"How do you know? What rabbits are there in London?"

"There *are*. On the heath."

"Christ's sake shut up, Bill."

Jacob lost the rabbit. Elaina left off shouting. Bill felt sick. They went on around the lake. After about 20 minutes, she said, "God, Bill. Sorry."

"S'OK."

"I don't know what – it must be PMT."

Bill knew what PMT was, though he didn't understand what it was. His mother had always been blaming it for her moods. But Elaina didn't have moods – Elaina was always too worried about upsetting someone –

"Look, there's the farm. And there's Mr perky Perkins's house, that red one up by the wooded bit. Hey, maybe the farm sells ice-cream."

The farm shop was by the gate of the farm. Beyond, flowed sloping summer fields, with cream rolled-up rugs on legs – sheep. The other way, the hill curved down to a craggy path, and so to the strand of the lake. The shop was open, and sold everything on earth.

Jacob took no notice. The moment they reached the brink of the downward path, the dog scooted away. Bill was terrified Elaina would lose her temper again, and when she didn't, and simply looked concerned, Bill suggested he should follow the dog down. It was a relief to get away. "Ice-cream ready when you come back!" she cried after him.

Bill trekked down the path, through the cascades of oak and beech. He couldn't see the beauty, not even the potential, now. It was just a green place, full of trouble. He found Jacob at the water's edge, drinking and drinking as if about to consume the lake.

"She put you out a new bowl. It was the big cereal one. Didn't you remember to drink the water?"

It was like taking a pee before you left the house. Or washing your hands – which Bill thought he hadn't done, had he? But yes, he had, only using the hygienic moistened tissues. He liked those. They smelled like doctor's stuff. He had liked doctors ever since the kettle and A and E. They had been kind, to Dad, and to Bill.

When Jacob at last stopped drinking, they trolled back up the slope. Birds sang and called in the woods. Just noises. There had been nothing eventful to see in the water.

Elaina had another bag full of items for meals. She handed Bill a can of Pepsi *and* a chocolate ice-cream. He stood holding them, now disabled – both hands lost to him – not wanting either treat any more. But he would have to eat and drink them. Not only not to make her feel bad – not to get her *angry*. Yes, he remembered the safety drill for that.

Jacob though, helped out. When Bill managed to drop it, the dog wolfed the ice-cream. Elaina saw, and a moment of fear resulted, but she only laughed after all. "Do you want another one, Bill? Go on, you can. It wasn't your fault."

Not much. "No, thank you."

Elaina was drinking cola too. The fat woman in the white blouse leaned over the counter, smiling at them all.

"Yes, they left in a great hurry. Sometimes happens, see. People – they get out of their depth."

"Mr Perkins – he rowed us across – he said they said there was something in the lake?"

"In the lake? I never. Well, I don't know what that could be. Nothing there but a few ducks and fishes. The water, see," said the white-bloused woman, "that comes in from the river, and goes on to the sea. Bit of a coming back, there. The lake, it's just a bit salty, mind. But you can drink it. But the best water's up on the hills. Sweet as sugar. Every house has its well. There's the Holly Well and the Black Ram Well, and Century Well over by the shore road. Water clean as anything, it is. Better than the tapped muck in the town."

Elaina leaned in too, towards the counter. "What well is ours, at the white house?"

"Oh, that well isn't much, I'm afraid. Dried out, that well is. Your water comes up from the town, piped to the taps. Sorry to disappoint."

"Yeah," said Elaina. "And I thought it had a bit of a kick to it, our water. Kidding myself."

"A kick? There's a funny thing, now."

Walking back was better. Elaina began to talk to Bill about Shaw, just gently, confiding. Bill liked it, to hear his father so comprehended, forgiven and adored. Was it safe now, then?

"I've been very good," said Shaw, at lunch. "I've done 500 words." He still looked gloomy. When things were going right, he could skate through two-and-a-half thousand in a morning. "One interesting line I came up with – listen –" He picked up his long-hand notebook, and read: "Maybe hope springs eternal, but malice springs eternally.' What do you think. Elly?"

"Ironic and nasty. Strong."

"I thought so too. Have to place it right, the line, but it's very pertinent to the text. But, well, I did read a bit, too. About the rivers here. There's a guidebook in the bookshelf."

Lunch was sandwiches, thick chunks of ham and sliced tomatoes. Bill managed to wiggle the tomatoes out and lose them. He took an apple though, and carried it off to eat, then left it somewhere, uneaten.

After lunch, Shaw and Elaina departed upstairs for a rest. Bill thought it was really for sex. That was fine.

He went into the kitchen and looked at Jacob, nosing at his water-bowl, not drinking it. Jacob grunted, shovelling the bowl about.

Bill went to the fridge, got out the Evian, tipped the tapwater down the sink, and filled the bowl again from the bottle. Once he set it down, Jacob lowered his head and lapped.

Standing watching, Bill cautiously sniffed at himself. Nothing, he thought, but... he might be wrong. He took another bottle of Evian from the fridge and carried it to the bathroom, where he twice filled the basin, and washed himself all over, thoroughly. He had heard of actors who refused to wash their hair or bathe in ordinary water. Was that why he had done it?

He turned on the tap and let the ordinary water run through, the water everyone else in the house was using

for tea and coffee, cleaning fruit and vegetables, and for having baths and showers.

From the bedroom came soft seethings. Poor Martians. He had to take care of them.

Bill craned forward and stared at the gushing tap. He was about to reach up and stick his tongue under the flow, when Jacob padded into the room. The growl that burst from the dog could have come from prehistory. It was dark and horrible, lawless, menacing and full of fear. Bill stood up. His put his hand, one finger, towards the running water. Jacob snarled, his lip peeled back from healthy gums and ice-white shark's teeth. "What is it?" Bill asked softly. But Jacob had never learned to talk. When Bill turned off the tap, Jacob came and leaned against him, raising his eloquent head to be caressed.

Along the hall in the bedroom, Elaina gave a thin, wavering scream. It was only sex, but normally she kept so quiet, for Bill's sake. Maybe they thought he was out in the orchard.

He kissed Jacob between the eyes and they went down, silently as clever burglars, through the house, and out by the scullery door.

The old well was in the orchard, covered by a moveable lid, clung round with ivy. Bill climbed up the step and pushed at the lid. He peered over into a rusty nothing, and Jacob, running up next to him, paws on the rim, peered in too. Jacob seemed interested, but not upset.

The well was dry.

From the house, through open windows, voices.

"Oh stop it, Elaina. Just be quiet. I'll work later, when it's cooler."

"I only said –"

"You're nagging. Why? Concerned I can't earn any more money, that it? Stuck with an old man who can't keep you in Chardonay and fucking Alpen."

"Christ. What is it with you? You are getting to be a pain, Shaw – *Shaw – let go of me, you bastard* –"

Bill and Jacob sprinted along the orchard, through the extending shadows of the three o'clock trees. The embryos of apples hung above them. Through trunks they glimpsed hills, distant isolated houses, the flat shine of the lake.

He had only once been seriously late home. That time he had been avoiding a couple of kids, and got lost on the edge of the heath after school. Dad came along later, with torches and two neighbours, calling. Bill hadn't meant to frighten Shaw. Now, Bill didn't consider that. He shut them both, his father, the woman, from his mind. And with them, the sound of the slap he had heard ringing out from the bedroom window.

Bill and Jacob ran through the orchard and the afternoon, and wandered across the hills, down to the lip of the lake. There they played desperately, as if very, very happy, in the deepening golden light. When the sun moved over, beyond the hills, mauve shadows dipped the shore. The lake turned to pale smooth metal, lit by one long last warm sun-ray. Then everything sighed to a luminous dimness, and stars began to appear on the dark blue sky.

By now Bill was hungry. So, doubtless, was Jacob. Bill sat skimming pebbles out across the lake. He couldn't

make them bounce. Jacob sat by his side, panting, not complaining.

Night unfolded its wings.

"How's it happen?" Bill asked Jacob. Jacob looked at him attentively, listening, considering. "Is it the well?" If Jacob knew – very likely he did – he couldn't say.

What time was it? The moon had come up and was, going over, and Bill, who had left his watch behind in the bathroom, guessed the hour was almost 9 pm.

Normally by now dinner had been eaten, dishes seen to. Maybe they would have had some TV, reading, or a game – chess, or *Galactic Grab* on Dad's computer. Bath and bed looming. Bill was tired. Tonight he wouldn't have been sorry to be sent to bed. Should they sleep down here? Bill stared about him. There were creeping shades along the shore, which might be anything. Though they had misunderstood what Mr Perkins had said – or indeed Mr Perkins himself misunderstood what he heard – there might anyway be – *things* – in the lake, which only surfaced by night. Could any of those be worse than what might be happening at the house on the hill? Torn between the proper and instructive terrors of youth, and the deadly horror-terror of real life, Bill started to cry. Jacob shoved in close. Bill held the dog, breathed courage in from his coat, and closed the sluice-gates of his eyes with a sharp pain against the tears. "We'd better go back, Jacob. See how it is, eh? Can't be so bad. Maybe it's OK now. Maybe it wasn't so bad – maybe."

Boy and dog walked back along the shore, and found the steps that rose up to the white house. No one had come to look for them. Or – had searchers gone in another direction?

They ran up the steps, up the hill.

This way, coming to the house from the front, it towered up suddenly, foreshortened, unnerving – *black*. For there weren't any lights on, not in the upper rooms, nor the bay windows of the front facade. On the unlighted veranda, the table and chairs had an intense stasis. If anybody had ever had dinner tonight, the table had been monumentally cleared – last night, they hadn't been so tidy. On the other hand, they hadn't, last night, knocked over any chairs, and now one lay on its side. A rose, shattered from the vine, covered the ground below like flakes of white paper.

They had gone out. They must have done. Out looking for Bill. That was it.

New panic enfolded the old leaden panic of the afternoon.

On the top step, below the slope of the hill that led up to the veranda, Bill stood, gazing in darkness, on darkness. And that was when Jacob began, deep in his guts, to growl like a nightmare wolf.

From nowhere sound and fury, movement and threat. The front door crashed open and light blazed out of the hallway, slicing the veranda down the middle, and the night, and Bill's eyes. And through the light, a roar of a voice, not really human, like some demon in a movie – words, but not properly words, rage unable to decipher itself. It was Shaw. Bill could just make him out through the blinding light, just make out his voice through the

demon roaring.

"Sorry – " Bill faltered. He wanted to turn and run, or run to his father and have his father change at once back into – a father.

But the combination demon-man came blundering out and reached for Bill. Then Bill *heard* the words, "Little fucking bastard – get inside – " and a foot kicking out, all the weight of the body behind it, at Jacob – who, instinct honed from the caves of his ancestral past, leapt from its way, and half lay, belly flat to grass, snarling. For Bill, true reaction had already been too far subsumed by ordinary life. *He* was already caught. Hauled into the house. The door slammed. Three centuries of stone and timbering quaked probably not for the first time.

They were in the front room, and again light slammed on and Elaina was lying there in a chair, her face bruised and her nails broken and her eyes mad, rising up, screaming at both of them.

On the low table were glasses and a glass jug. They had been drinking – what was it? – not wine, not lemon barley water. No. Clear, the glass. Shiny. Water. They had been drinking water. From the tap.

Shaw pushed his son aside. Bill stared up and saw this face that was a devil's and the tortured eyes he remembered, which howled for help from miles away.

Elaina spoke slurringly, as if very drunk.

"I'm thirsty. Go on, you parasitic little git, fill that jug. None of the shit from the bottles. Get it out the fucking taps, d'ya hear?"

"Yes," said Bill. He seized the jug, and ran by his father who, in that extreme moment, seemed dementedly to try to strike Bill even as he passed. But the blow missed, the passage and the kitchen door were gained.

Darkness was still there.

Bill stood breathing. Perhaps they might forget they had sent him on this mission. But no. They would crave what he must bring them. He had only a moment. Bill crossed to the sink, put in the plug, and turned the tap full on. As his night-vision once more adjusted, half turning, he saw the head of Jacob appear wolf-like against the starry kitchen window-pane, and heard the dog's body slam against the frame.

Then and only then, there in the dark, refined by the worst fear on earth: terror of those you love, Bill saw it. Saw what was in the water.

A narrow sound scraped out of his throat. Was this a bad dream? Never. Bill was a child, even he grasped that he was, and children know, and children still *see* – as animals generally do, (unless too corrupted by proximity to mankind) and other creatures who retain their higher sight.

This then was why only he, this altruistically obedient boy, had instinctively avoided shower and bath, even washing his hands with wipes, rinsing his mouth with Evian, not eating any salad, dropping what they thought he *had* eaten off the veranda, unseen, not biting into an apple. Even the coffee he believed he had *wanted*, he hadn't got. Water. Everything had been washed in it. Fruit and veg, human skins – or it was in the kettle for the tea and coffee, mixed in the lemon and barley drink – going straight in at every orifice or little cut, and through the

intestines by the mouth itself, that infallible door. Tiding like the sea.

They were like bubbles made of mercury, the things in the water, about the size, he thought, of pound coins. *Easily* big enough to see – once you *could* see them. If ever you did. And they were hard and firm, yet flexible, and they moved, gleaming, rubbing against each other, attaching and subdividing and making more and more, so the whole sheet of the sinkful of water, the gush from the tap, were like a fountain and a lake of miniature silver *worlds*. But they were like microbes too. Huge microbes. Like amoebas seen in the biology book. And they were the seeds of some ancient evil, come up from the elder spring under the hill, bypassing cunningly the dried well, entering instead, by some little chip or hairline fracture of the modern pipes, the homogenized public water sent from the town.

The two out there were bellowing. They didn't sound at all human, more like frightened cattle, Bill thought, a bull stung by wasps –

He filled the water jug from the tap, almost half-way. There was a new bottle of white wine in the fridge. It wasn't open. There was no time. At the window now Jacob was barking and howling, scratching, scrabbling, trying to claw down the wall –

Bill smashed off the top of the bottle of wine. He hoped no glass fell down in it, but only out on the floor. He slopped the wine into the water. And, in the dark, watched the things that were in the water writhing bursting – disintegrating – dying. When they had completely vanished, he heard Jacob fall silent. The dog was grinning in at him, pleased that his lesson had been well-taught.

Bill ran into the front room. Two Neanderthal beings in jeans came rampaging at him. He dodged them and sloshed the dead water and the curative wine into their glasses. Then they rushed for those. Would they notice a faint tawny tinge, an alcoholic bouquet? What would happen now, if they drank? Would they too die?

After a few minutes Bill sat down on the couch. He sat watching them. He watched them come back, Dad and Elaina. They returned dazed, and abruptly drunk, pissed out of their minds, yet quiet, and rational. They were bewildered. Yet they didn't forget the prelude. They gaped at it in retrospect, and at Bill, and stammered things. They wandered about the room. Shaw staggered over and stroked Bill's hair. Bill held himself like stone not to shiver. By 11.30 he felt able to get up and bring in the rest of the wine bottle, then let Jacob back into the house. Jacob padded patiently into the front room too, and sat by Bill, as they watched Elaina and Shaw, who had come back, dishevelled and levelled, from the pit of Hell.

Though they tried often to speak to Bill, Bill would only nod. He was their judge. Mostly aware of what had occurred, they accepted this fact. They respectfully left Bill to judge them, he and the dog.

Near morning, they went, the man and woman, to the fridge. Brought in the case of Evian and some cans of Pepsi. When morning really came, everyone ate bread and butter and drank orange juice. They didn't talk at all. No one took a bath or shower.

Later each of them slept, there in the chairs, and Bill on the couch, Jacob next to him, head on Bill's knees.

Aeons after, voices drifted across Bill's sleep. She. He. These known strangers.

"Did we? Was it? I? You? What shall we do?"

"Forgive. Don't forget."

"But it must be reported. It's – poisonous – what is it?"

"Some hallucinogen – chemical filth. Or natural unnatural. Maybe always here. Maybe in the old days – Twelfth century, Eighteenth – they could handle it."

"But we can't just – not –"

"No one believed anyone. The 'other lot' as Perkins put it, probably tried the police. And the police didn't believe them. Or they didn't bother. Or it was hushed up. And you know what they can be like, these sort of – hate to say it, but *parochial* people. Take our money, despise us. We're tourists. Enemies. No doubt they think our sort – we either survive, or we don't."

"But what we – what –"

"It can't happen again, away from here. We have to believe that. And... make *him* believe it."

"Bill. Poor Bill. Oh God, Shaw."

"Don't cry. OK, cry. I'll join you. But when he wakes up, we *stop*."

In sleep, Bill was running with Jacob. Running up a mountain of years – ten, twelve, sixteen – and away and

away (the woman and the man left far below for ever), and right over the top, Jacob and he, together and alone.

They were rowed across the lake the other way.

"Shame you got to go so soon. Business, was it?"

"That's right, Mr Perkins."

"And a lovely day, and good weather forecast all month. And your missus's face all bruised where she fell down the oak stair – lucky nothing broken. And lost your deposit on the stay, too. There's a pity."

Elaina looked grimly through her sun-glasses at the receding hills. Shaw looked silently into his thoughts. Bill, with Jacob watching him like a feral yet benign henchman, stared only down into the milky silk of the lake, blue-green-grey. Mr Perkins rowed steadily for the further shore, the car, and the train. Mr Perkins, for all his words of commiseration, seemed slightly to be smiling, maybe only at the sunlight, and the perfect tranquillity of the day.

Tanith Lee is one of Britain's most famous writers of fantasy and gothic novels. Her previous stories in *Interzone* were "The Girl Who Lost Her Looks" (issue 128), "Yellow and Red" (issue 132), "Jedella Ghost" (issue 135), "The Sky-Green Blues" (issue 142), "Where Does the Town Go at Night?" (issue 147) and "La Vampiresse" (issue 154). She lives in East Sussex

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"Interesting Times"

Jack McDevitt interviewed by Darrell Schweitzer

Schweitzer: Does the science-fiction writer ever feel overtaken by events? We are living in what the Chinese curse would call extremely "interesting times," in which, quite literally, thanks to CNN, anything you see in the newspaper is old news and obsolete, and everything we ever did regarding writing has changed profoundly in the past 20 years. I wrote a story in 1976 in which people in the future were still using typewriters, and who would have imagined that the author could typeset his own book on a desktop writing machine? And the US space programme may be in abeyance for a while, but the Chinese are going back to the Moon. So everything we ever imagined about the future may be becoming obsolete in our lifetimes.

McDevitt: I suspect we're all becoming careful about making predictions. My tendency is to look back from a couple hundred years in the future and talk about things that may have happened at the end of the 20th or the end of the 21st century. I'm getting a little bit leery about doing that. I had assumed, as had, I think, the rest of the world, that we had hit some kind of status-quo back around 1998. The "history has ended" routine.

The Smithsonian has an interesting exhibition going around the country called "Why The Future Isn't What It Used to Be." They talk about what we were predicting in the 1950s would be happening by the end of the century, and how much of it has not occurred. Like the rocket-belt. You wouldn't want drunks out there with rocket-belts. But there were all kinds of things. We thought we would have robots walking around houses. We'd be on Mars. As it turned out, a lot of

stuff that actually happened came out of left field. We did not predict computers, really. We got nowhere near the Web. So I would tend to keep a very cautious distance about specifics any more.

Schweitzer: Does that mean you'd rather write far-future?

McDevitt: I don't know about the far future, but keep it a couple centuries up and just don't go into too many details about what the world looks like. Or write present-day and introduce the wild card.

Schweitzer: From the perspective of 1950s science fiction, the political structure of the present world would be virtually unimaginable.

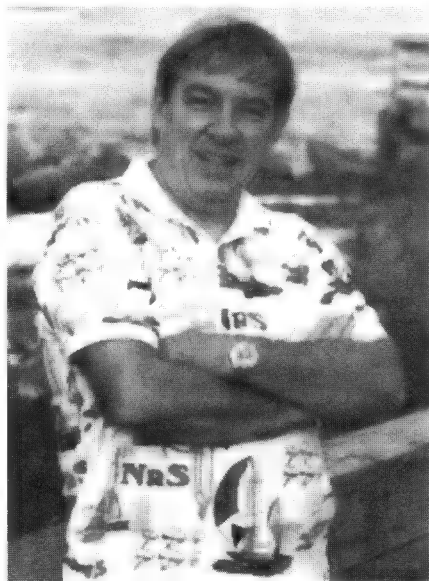
McDevitt: I sat on a panel yesterday in which we were talking about weapons of mass destruction. Real weapons of

mass destruction, and what could be done if the terrorists were really serious and things continue as they are going now. I knew before I got in there that I wasn't going to eat lunch afterward, and that's exactly how it turned out. The future that only a few years ago looked pretty secure and progressive suddenly looks very scary. I'm not as confident any more that we're looking at the sunny uplands Churchill used to talk about.

Schweitzer: Who could have imagined the present 20 years ago? No Soviet Union. Russia has turned into a down-at-the-heels Third World country getting E for Effort. The re-emergence of medieval Islam with high-tech weapons. China goes capitalist. And so on. This is not the future that anyone planned, or wrote about.

McDevitt: At the turn of the century, I was invited by various groups, Elks and the Friends of the Library, and so on to predict what was going to happen in the next hundred years. What I told them was that you cannot predict six months down the line with any degree of certainty. You can do the old "if this goes on" routine, but it never goes on. I suggested to them that they might think in terms of H. G. Wells coming in at the beginning of 1900 and trying to predict the 20th Century. He would have to come up with computers, atomic weapons, Hitler, World War I, heavier-than-air powered aircraft. You can't do it. All this stuff is off the table. There are differences in *quality*, serious scientific breakthroughs and political train wrecks that are unlooked-for.

I'll tell you the thing that makes it so difficult. Talk to Wells in 1900 about writers. Tell him you need a bet-



ter instrument for writing. How are people going to be writing at the end of the 20th Century? He's going to suggest a better typewriter.

You're just going to miss whatever actually happens. We're not going to come anywhere close. The predictions that science-fiction writers make about the 21st Century, I suppose, will let you look back at the end of the century and do another one of those Smithsonian exhibits, about why we didn't get the stuff that we were supposed to get.

Schweitzer: Sometimes you begin to wonder about next week. Never mind the end of the century.

McDevitt: Yes. Things are coming faster, which is another part of this thing that's horrific. Events are just literally tumbling on top of one another. The thing that is maybe scariest about all this is that as civilization becomes more sophisticated, it becomes more vulnerable to the crazies. There's not a whole lot you can do to Afghanistan to hurt it, but you can do horrible things to Britain or the United States. That tendency is going to continue. It makes me wonder if there is not an omega-point, where you get to a stage where you become so vulnerable to any loony that survival becomes unlikely. Biological laboratories are probably going to proliferate in the 21st century. Who knows what's going to come out of them? Make it, dump it in the water, and bye-bye.

Schweitzer: Or else the developed countries build a super high-tech fortress, and it becomes the War of the Worlds versus people with spears.

McDevitt: It will be very hard for Americans, for people in Western civilization, to adapt to the kind of security that might become necessary. Or we might go the other way and end up in an Orwellian scenario. Right now there are some very scary things that are happening.

Schweitzer: How do you as a science-fiction writer then continue to deal with the future? We notice that a lot of sf writers solve this problem by *not* dealing with the future. It has been argued that the prominence of alternate histories show science fiction turning its back on the future.

McDevitt: I deal with it, I think, by not worrying about it too much. I don't write to predict what's going to happen. I just set up my own parameters. Here is a particular future we have arrived at. There's no problem as long as it is not inconsistent with where we

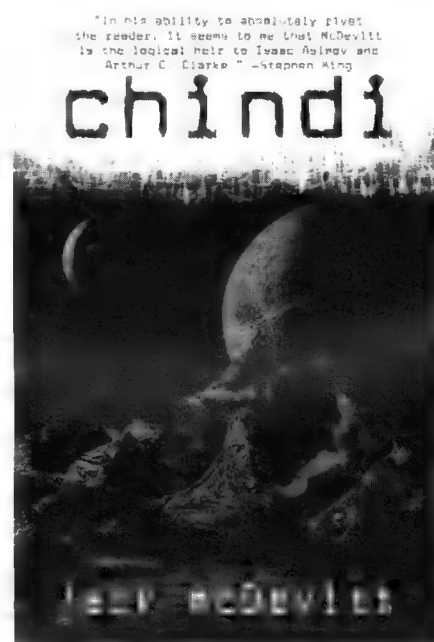
are now. I think if you keep it general enough, usually you are pretty safe.

For example, the world 200 years from now, which is where several of my books are located. Presumably there will still be Western civilization. Presumably all North America will be a political unit of some kind by then. It seems a fairly safe guess. It seems unlikely that there will be any event in the next 30 years which will make that world improbable. If there is a catastrophic event, then I probably am not going to be interested in selling books anyhow. So I just don't let it concern me too much.

Schweitzer: I suppose there are some things that don't change for a while. Look at the map. When was the last time a country truly *ceased to exist*? I don't mean that it was merely swallowed up for a while, like Poland in the 18th century, but, after some catastrophe, it was truly gone. Carthage is a rare example. Britain has been there for a very long time. France has been there for a long time in some recognizable form. So much may remain the same, unless the nation-state disappears entirely, which is a challenge for the science-fiction writer.

McDevitt: It does appear that international stability is here. Things get a little shaky once in a while. There is the possibility that we go from the nation-state to some kind of mega-corp style civilization. But I don't think that's going to happen. I think things are locked in for the immediate future.

What's scary about this I guess is that we've seen change happening so quickly. My gut sense until two years ago was that any major change would take a long time. If we wound up with



a society run by corporations, as opposed to governments, it would take such a long time that it wouldn't matter if I got it right or not. I guess that changed with the fall of the Soviet Union. I'm with you on that issue. I was certain that the Soviet Union was going to outlive me by many decades. I was just amazed. When it collapsed they had astronauts in orbit at the time who were stranded because there was nobody to bring them down. It's a different kind of world.

People always have a tendency to resist change. I used to do management training. That was one of the big things we talked about. If you try anything new, your employees are always going to resist it, and if management wants you to do something new, you're going to resist it. That's wired into us, and the reason it is wired into us is that for human beings, change always meant trouble. It was always the barbarians arriving at the gate, or the river flooding, or the plague. It was always bad news. You never got good news back in the old days, the 3rd century BC or whatever. Technological changes were very slow in coming, so people always lived exactly the way their grandparents did. Well, we don't do that any more. My father was born before the Wright Brothers flew and he lived to see the first flight to the Moon. However, my father would not have recognized a video cassette. Now when you go out and buy a piece of technology, you expect it to be obsolete in a year and a half.

But political events seem to be following the same course, and maybe they are driven by technology, with political leaders sitting on top of technological capabilities that they used not to have, and consequently more power than they used to have. And a more slippery slope. I suppose it is all very tempting. The capability to bypass a lot of what we used to call diplomacy and take a short-cut to a quick military solution, not only by the United States, but by other western powers as well — that could lead to serious disruptions.

Schweitzer: One of the more glib ways of putting it is that we are not living in Robert Heinlein's future. We're living in Philip K. Dick's future.

McDevitt: Yeah, that's basically what happened.

Schweitzer: Maybe the way to deal with this is with absurdity and with comedy.

McDevitt: That's something you want to watch on stage. You don't want to live with it!

Schweitzer: But sometimes you do. As for books of yours that are set in the present day – *Moonfall*, which is more or less set in the present...

McDevitt: In 2024.

Schweitzer: Was there a Soviet Union in it?

McDevitt: The book was written four or five years ago, by which time the Soviet Union was safely gone. There is a United States functioning. There is a US president. I don't think there are any major changes from the world you and I live in. If I had it to write again there are probably a few technological things I would change. I probably should have had full fuel-cell vehicles running, as opposed to what I did have, which I won't even go into, because it embarrasses me at this point.

The book is set in 2024 because I needed a year in which there was a total eclipse of the Sun seen across the entire United States, and it also needed to be a presidential year.

Schweitzer: So there will be an eclipse –

McDevitt: The total eclipse will happen.

Schweitzer: But nothing is necessarily expected to hit the Moon.

McDevitt: Nothing that I'm aware of.

Schweitzer: Have you ever felt the temptation to duck the issue of the future and write an alternate history?

McDevitt: I am not a big fan of alternate history. I've done one alternate history story, but I don't think I would ever do a novel in the genre. The thing that is enticing about alternate history is to change the event and see what happens. Once you've done it, you've done it, so I don't think it really fits well at novel length. You change the event and then what you've probably got is an adventure story or an historical novel where the history is a little bit changed. But my interest is more in... what would really have happened if Churchill had been killed when he was hit by the car? It happened in New York, back around 1924. Where would we be now if you remove Churchill from the 20th century? My one alternate-history story. I did it for a Gregory Benford anthology. The assignment was to look at military engagements, to change the outcome of a battle, and then to change the world as an outcome of that engagement. I picked what I always considered to be the most critical military engagement in the history of Western civilization, which is a battle whose

name rings no bells for people. Want to take a try at it?

Schweitzer: I have a few candidates. Manzikert. Alexander the Great loses to the Persians at Issus... Actium goes the other way.

McDevitt: They're all pretty well known. The battle I used was the Milvian Bridge.

Schweitzer: Yes, that would have changed everything. The Roman Empire was about 5% Christian at the time, when Constantine the Great converted and decided to back Christianity. If Constantine had fallen off his horse – or off the Milvian Bridge – there is no reason to believe that Christianity would have prevailed.

McDevitt: I don't recall any more who the emperor was that he went up against.

Schweitzer: Maxentius. He was a usurper anyway.

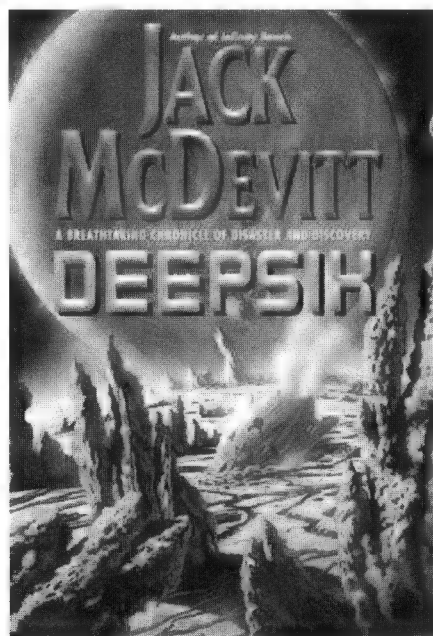
McDevitt: Maxentius had a big problem. I used to do leadership programmes. If you look at Maxentius, you see that he is not a guy who is a very good leader. People are not going to follow him to the death. Among other things, he slept with the wives of his senior officers. He didn't mind executing people for trivial reasons. He created a lot of problems. His plan was to lure Constantine across the Milvian Bridge and then drop the bridge into the Tiber. He had weakened the bridge. Maxentius was on the far bank with his troops when he started the planned withdrawal across the Tiber. What happened, of course, was his people saw their opportunity and

dropped the bridge into the Tiber with him on it, which is how Constantine won. I wrote it from the point of view of Edward Gibbon wandering around a Europe still living in a dark age, because you didn't get a Church, so nobody copied the books, and you ended with a dark age that goes on and on. But once you've done that, shown the effect of the change, you've done it, and I am not interested in writing another 300 pages of Edward Gibbon wandering through a dark age.

Schweitzer: What are the charms of science fiction for you? What made you one of the distinctly future-oriented sf writers?

McDevitt: I love the mysteries that are possible to set up in a science-fiction novel. I'm a Sherlock Holmes addict. The only problem with Holmes is that while the character is endlessly fascinating, the mysteries can be dull. Who shot whom, that sort of thing. They're almost always pure whodunnits. It seems to me that with science fiction, you can have a mystery that works a lot better. I did a short story called "Cryptic," in which a character takes over the SETI. They've been out there for 50-60 years as we have, and they have not heard anything that could be confirmed as a signal. The guy who had been running it for the past 20 years had been told, "Do something else with your career. Don't hang with this thing. You're going nowhere." Nevertheless he stayed with the programme. Each year at Christmas time he went home to Massachusetts. On one occasion while trying to help a neighbour shovel out her lawn, he had a heart attack and died. Now the new guy coming in discovers that there was in fact a signal that was heard 15, 16 years earlier, and it does appear to have been a bona-fide alien signal. The question then becomes, why did a guy who had devoted his entire life to the search, hear a signal and then take all this flak from his colleagues and never reveal the truth? If you can come up with a rational solution to a mystery like that, you've got a great story. So those are the kinds of things you can do with science fiction.

Eternity Road presents a similar puzzle. The novel is set in a world that had collapsed a thousand years earlier. There was a virus that has wiped out almost everybody. Nobody even remembers much about our civilization. They don't know who built these piles of concrete everywhere. They refer to us as the Road Makers. There is a legend that somewhere there's a library that was salvaged during the time of troubles, that people put stuff away. The library, of course, would be priceless to find. Whether it exists,



nobody knows. There is a character who believes it exists. The characters live in the Memphis area, by the way. They organize an expedition while everybody laughs at them. The expedition goes out. A year and a half later the hero comes back. The other members of the expedition have died in various ways. They've fallen into rivers. They've contracted various diseases. They've been killed by savages. The leader of the mission comes back and says, "I guess it's not there. I was wrong." He goes into seclusion until a few years later he walks into the Mississippi. Then, after he is dead, they discover that there is a copy of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* in his bedroom. The book had been thought lost. Apparently, he had found the library and kept the knowledge secret. Why? It defies common sense. So they send out a second expedition to find out the truth about this place, and the story of the second expedition is the story of the novel.

Those kinds of things you can do in science fiction and you can't do in any other field. That's why I love the genre.

Schweitzer: I am sure that if you gave that as a challenge to a roomful of mystery writers, they could come up with something. Somebody discovers a new Shakespeare play. Why have they suppressed it?

McDevitt: Yes, sure. In one of Chesterton's Father Brown stories, there is a character who is obviously modelled on Sherlock Holmes. Father Brown is talking about the differences in technique between himself and the Holmes character. If there is a murder, Holmes starts measuring footprints and checking out brands of tobacco. Father Brown looks around for somebody who is behaving in a different way, contradictory to his norm. Strong stories, are driven by mystery and discovery. It's not good guys and bad guys, which is the way we see it in the Hollywood stuff. The really interesting science fiction is all about holding up a lamp in the darkness.

Another example of the same kind of thing – I am working on *Polaris*, in which three starships go out to take a look at a collision between a neutron star and a Class-G. They arrive at the scene and watch the neutron star, which is extremely compact, maybe the size of Chicago, and just this side of being a black hole. It's like a baseball going through fog. It takes about an hour, after which the Class-G explodes and collapses. When it's all over, the three ships start home. Two go into hyperspace. The third ship sends a message, "Departure imminent." That's the last anybody hears

from them. So they send in a rescue team, which finds the third ship, the *Polaris*, adrift and deserted. The lander is still on-board, and there is no place to go anyway, no habitable spot in the system. The ship is simply adrift. There are no aliens in play. So what happened? This is the kind of storyline that writes itself.

Schweitzer: It's the *Mary Celeste*.

McDevitt: It's the *Mary Celeste*, except you've got to come up with a solution, and the solution needs to be where the reader, when he gets to it, says, "My God, how could I not have seen that coming?" But you can set up enough false trails so he does not see it until you want him to. Maybe.

Schweitzer: Let's talk about your background. You obviously didn't devote your entire life to writing science fiction. You came to writing relatively late.

McDevitt: I have always wanted to be a science-fiction writer, since I was maybe five years old and saw one of the original *Flash Gordon* movies. That was what started me. I discovered *Thrilling Wonder* and *Startling Stories* when I was twelve. God bless my mother. She was a very religious person. I know she was shocked by the covers on *Startling*, especially. But she let me get away with them. She said, "Don't tell your father. Keep them in your room." That was one of the finest things she ever did. I discovered Ray Bradbury very early. I remember Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space*. That and Hal Clement's *Needle*. Great books.

So I wanted to write sf. But I hit college and started reading Charles

Dickens and I decided that I couldn't write at that level, therefore I couldn't write, without thinking that I really didn't have to compete with Charles Dickens. So I gave it up. And life got busy. I was in the Navy five years. When I came home I became an English teacher. Eventually, 23 years after I'd left LaSalle College, my wife Maureen persuaded me to write a science-fiction story. I was complaining about my job, how it had gotten boring, and she said, "Well this would be a good time to take the plunge. You're always talking about doing it, but talk is cheap." So I wrote a story called "The Emerson Effect" for *Twilight Zone* magazine, and they bought it, which amazed me to no end, and as Pogo says somewhere, it's been downhill ever since.

I've been a customs inspector and a navy officer and a taxicab driver. A newspaper reporter and an insurance investigator and a few other things. I look back now and I'm glad things worked out the way they did. If I had been successful and sold a story at 24, I don't think I'd want to have it show up in print somewhere now. At 24... how should I phrase it? Stories I would have been capable of at 24 would never have gotten past the editor anyway. You wouldn't have bought one.

Schweitzer: There certainly have been writers who started writing at 20 and went straight on from there.

McDevitt: It wouldn't have happened with me. I think at 24, I would have been thinking in terms of good and evil, comic-book stuff, and it would never have gotten off the ground.

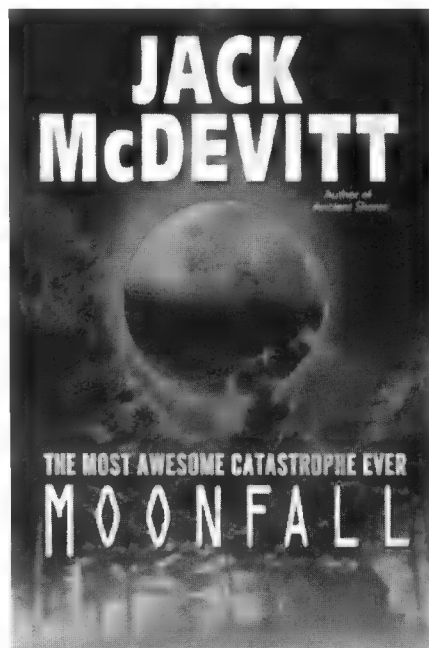
I had a college friend with whom I was going to write, back in the 1960s, a spy thriller. This was a time when James Bond was very big. Our hero was going to be a Native American secret agent whose name was – if you're ready – was to be John Thundershield. And we were planning it without cracking a smile. So I know what my writing career would have looked like had I started at 24.

Schweitzer: In other words, you would have gotten a pseudonym at 45 and claimed to be somebody else.

McDevitt: I sure would.

Schweitzer: You might have had less to write about. Don't you think that if you hadn't been in the Navy and all that, you wouldn't have had enough material to draw on?

McDevitt: It helps you make characters more believable. Having gone through all that, you recognize that



human beings are generally pretty decent, but usually flawed in one way or another. And the flaws are often what makes them interesting. And likeable. When I was planning John Thundershield, I obviously had a tin ear. Also, I was thinking about lead characters being basically admirable persons and getting things right and being generally fearless. The name's Bond. James Bond. Eventually I realized that wasn't a road I wanted to travel. If I wanted readers to identify and sympathize with my protagonist, I needed to make sure he or she had a few weaknesses.

Schweitzer: Ray Bradbury was one of those writers who went straight on from age 20.

McDevitt: I love Bradbury because he helped me survive as an English teacher. I taught at a high school in Levittown, Pennsylvania, after I came out of the Navy. They had the students reading *The Mill on the Floss*. Not stuff to fire a kid's imagination. But it was in the textbook we had, *Adventures in Literature*. It was there, it was cheap and easy to give to the kids. My responsibility was to show students that reading could be fun, to ignite a passion for books. I still remember having debates with some of the people there. You know, "They gotta learn to read Charles Dickens!" Well, what they needed to learn was that books are a kick, and if you can do that much they'll discover Dickens on their own.

So I tried a lot of things. I tried Sherlock Holmes, but Sherlock Holmes didn't work well. My students couldn't connect with Victorian England. Finally, after three or four different efforts, I tried *The Martian Chronicles*. The method that I used was to read and dramatize it. I remember doing "Mars is Heaven." The kids loved it. They scooped up copies of *The Martian Chronicles* and looked for more Bradbury. They liked Heinlein too. And Asimov. This was in the early '60s. There were some rumblings from the school board, but I was backed by my department chairman, and we did fine.

Schweitzer: Maybe you contributed to the last generation of readers...? I've even heard people in sf fandom say that reading is obsolete, like an eight-track tape and science fiction has moved on to other forms. I think this is nonsense...

McDevitt: Sure it is. Movies and books are completely different forms of communication, and you can do a lot in either of those that you cannot do in the other. I don't think there is any

kind of video substitute for a good book, and there never will be.

Schweitzer: It also comes down to the fact that if you're illiterate, you can't write a good screenplay.

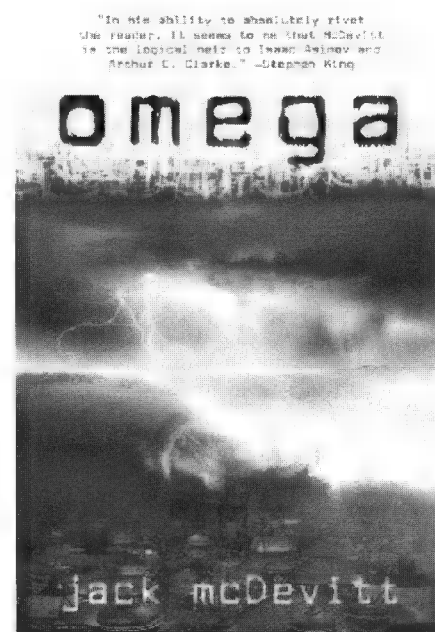
McDevitt: I would hate to think that we'd live in a future where literacy is zero, except for some group somewhere that runs things. It's not going to happen.

Schweitzer: We might be heading into a future in which people have very short attention spans and they read things as blips on the Internet –

McDevitt: Some people maybe. I saw a statistic in *USA Today*, which says that 90% of people in the United States think astrology works. So, what's the level of literacy in the United States and in Western civilization right now? I'm not sure. If you're talking about a thoughtful kind of literacy, which is a bit different from being able to read *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, it's probably not very high, and I don't know that it ever was.

Schweitzer: We can turn my question on its head and ask why, if everyone is only reading short little blips from the Internet, the books keep getting longer.

McDevitt: That's a good question. It seems to me the only real issue here is what form the book will take, and not whether or not we're going to have books. Is it going to be electronic? Is it going to be a physical object? I have no idea. I like books that I can handle, preferably with leather covers, but that's an older guy speaking who is trying to hold on to 1946.



Schweitzer: I will predict that the true electronic book will not replace the physical book until we are in space in a big way. You know how they walk around in *Star Trek* with little hand-held book-readers. Those exist today, but I think they'll only take over when the cost of shipping a paper book into space becomes prohibitive, and the cost of beaming the information across interplanetary distances becomes relatively very low.

McDevitt: That makes eminently good sense, Darrell.

Schweitzer: We have the bias that we want to have physical books and magazines for which people pay, such as the one this interview is appearing in.

McDevitt: There's nothing quite as warm as a house that has a couple magazines on the coffee table and a wall full of books. You can't get around that. This electronic age where physical books are going to disappear, I don't want to be there for it. There are certain things I want in my future. I want fireplaces. I know there are better ways to heat a house, but I want a fireplace. I want some books, and if I can't have them, I'm not going to go.

Schweitzer: Also, any future is going to contain substantial elements of the past. You don't assume that Futuropolis, the great city of the future, will contain only new, gleaming buildings, unless the former city has been blown away in the past. There will still be centuries-old buildings, often adapted to new uses, some merely still in use. You can see this in any city in Europe. There will be older elements. So maybe people will cling to fireplaces merely because they like them.

McDevitt: Just as we cling to old ideas because we have been programmed. We've been programmed in political, religious, and social views of the way the world works. Are we ever going to get past an era in which we have so much religious fanaticism? Assuming you could get in and do some education, how many generations will it take until you get tolerant believers?

Schweitzer: Maybe you will have to redefine what constitutes a believer. But let me go for an optimistic note. I think we have made some progress. We have at least parts of the civilized world in which tolerance is regarded as a virtue. There have been times in the past when tolerance was not a commonly-admired virtue, certainly Europe as recently as 1600. In Shakespeare's day atheism was a capital crime, and if somebody belonged to the wrong ver-

sion of Christianity, you probably wanted to kill him. Also, in his day, very likely, people still went to war for *glory*, the idea of winning fame on the battlefield. It's a little before Shakespeare's time, but why did Tamerlane commit all those outrageous atrocities? The answer is: glory, to make himself famous and to be admired. I don't think people do that any more.

McDevitt: That sounds like why Saddam Hussein was misbehaving. He seems to have had similar feelings.

Schweitzer: But he's an anachronism and wasn't notably successful.

McDevitt: When I was ten years old I had a life-changing experience. It was 1945, and I walked into our local movie theatre and saw news films from Europe. The first American troops were breaking into the concentration camps. I remember seeing the bodies stacked up, some living skeletons, some dead, and it was a thing I never forgot. It was hard for me to believe. Up until that point, for me, the Second World War had been all about aircraft and battleships and stuff like that. There was a certain glory to it, I suppose. We didn't get the up-close kind of view you get nowadays. But those images of those people stacked like cordwood did something to me that I could never get away from. The image remains very strong. I could not believe that had happened in my world. It gave me a sense of the kind of world that I lived in, that I had not had until then, and which I have never been able to shake. To me the world remains a very scary place. We live in a great time. We live in a good country at the right time. Life is good. Medicine is good. We know how to stay alive a long time. And it's worth holding on to, and whatever we have to do to hold onto it, I'm in favour of. The trick is figuring out what you have to do.

Schweitzer: And which parts are worth hanging on to.

McDevitt: That's why you have conservatives. You hang onto the stuff that works.

Schweitzer: They also hang onto the stuff that doesn't work.

McDevitt: Sure. That's why you need liberals.

Schweitzer: That seems to be a big problem in China right now.

McDevitt: Well, you know, there are parts of the United States that try to hold onto a past that is less than admirable. Less than virtuous.

Schweitzer: And possibly less than real. I think what we see in fundamentalists of all stripes is that they idealize an imaginary past. For an American right-wing Christian, it is the imaginary era in which everybody was God-fearing and the Founding Fathers were all pious men – and this was never actually *true*.

McDevitt: And Darwin hadn't been born yet.

Schweitzer: So, if the past is a myth, maybe the future is a myth too.

McDevitt: Wasn't it Henry Ford who said "History is bunk"? Yeah, sure. You read it the way you need to. I wonder about the children of fundamentalists who wind up in colleges. There was the story, I guess it was a few weeks ago now, about a biology professor getting in trouble. What did he do...? He refused to teach evolution to biology students and was fired by the college. I heard the news story over a Christian radio network, and the announcer was explaining how the students were right behind him because he was doing the right thing and seizing the initiative from the –

Schweitzer: Liberal-Pinkos –

McDevitt: Liberal-Pinkos who were making a problem.

Schweitzer: The medieval mind has never quite left us. We all have stories like that. I can tell you a much ghastlier one, which I heard from a colleague. A Jewish woman was in college, and her room-mate was a fundamentalist from Tennessee or somewhere. For the first couple of days when they lived in the dorm together, the room-mate would keep looking at her funny. Finally the Jewish woman asked, "What are you staring at?" and the other said, "But where are the horns?"

McDevitt: [Laughs.] You're kidding.

Schweitzer: [Firmly.] No, I'm not.

McDevitt: You were talking earlier about how we now accept tolerance as a virtue and it wasn't always that way. If you look back, you'll see that they didn't fight religious wars in the Hellenic world. A lot of people will argue that if you don't fight a war over religion, you will fight it over something else. And that may be true. But the difference is that when you're fighting over something else, you can usually sit down and negotiate. But when you're fighting religious wars, it seems to be that you fight to the last man. You cannot talk to people who are absolutely persuaded that you are the Devil. There was a

news story a few weeks ago about a head mullah in London who made the point that the world belongs to Allah and to the believers and the rest of us need to get out. I am not sure where he expects us to go, but it is impossible to do diplomacy with people like that.

Schweitzer: The mullah was merely an unreconstructed 7th-century Muslim. That would have been a perfectly orthodox attitude in AD 650.

McDevitt: If we could send him back to the 7th century, it would be beneficial to all.


Schweitzer: You could make science fiction about this. Imagine a future in which the religious zealots took over the Earth and everybody else went to the stars.

McDevitt: We were talking earlier about the inability to solve the population problem by shipping everybody off-world. Of course you can never do that. Another idea we've seen periodically is that you have a discontented religious group, and you send them off and let them have their own world somewhere. Probably the numbers would prevent that from happening.

Schweitzer: That model is based on American experience. It is precisely what everybody from the Puritans through the Mormons were doing. We've just run out of frontiers on Earth.

McDevitt: We were coming here the other day, coming up Route 62 to Niagara Falls, and every once in a while we passed one of these private religious academies. I can't help thinking – maybe I am being harsh – but they seem to be places where they close minds. A close friend, a guy I knew in the service many years ago, shocked me recently. He had a grandchild who was having headaches. They brought in a local preacher and performed an exorcism, and the headaches went away. Other than this one incident, my experience with this guy is that he is completely rational. But you get off onto this religious things and suddenly you're in an alternate reality.

Schweitzer: No one guarantees that the future is good. That's why there are dystopias.

McDevitt: But there has been steady progress. The signs are there that things are getting better, but as somebody said, it's a race between civilization and catastrophe. Now that we're getting better and better weapons, there is some concern that these lunatics may take us all out. I don't know. I hope not. I remain an optimist, but I am not quite as optimistic I once was. 

The Ugly Truth

Tony Ballantyne

Four fighter planes, sinister in olive drab, rose into the winter sky, black smoke billowing behind them. At the last moment, they turned to avoid the silver passenger airliner, kicking in their afterburners as they sped over the cold January sea.

Capel doe Mistletoe, comfortable in a window seat of the airliner, watched them go with a sense of unease. She had noted the yellow rings painted around the black missiles slung beneath the fighters' wings. The fact that planes were now carrying live ammunition meant that the probability of war was increasing.

"You look concerned," said the woman sitting by her in the aisle seat. She had introduced herself as Picael back in Peach City airport and then fallen into such easy conversation with Capel that they had chosen seats together on the flight to Fourways.

Capel sighed. "Those planes. Doesn't the thought of war unnerve you?"

Picael gave a sympathetic nod that Capel found slightly patronizing. Picael's powder-blue suit was smart enough, but her shoes and suitcase were not quite the same shade. In Capel's opinion, Picael had too little money to dress to fashion, too little confidence to dress otherwise.

"I find war a little upsetting," said Picael, and her face suddenly hardened. "Although to be honest, Capel, war is the least of your worries."

Capel felt a sudden sense of dislocation as Picael's whole

manner changed from friendly merchant into something distinctly more sinister. The gentle East Coast accent had drained from her words, now she spoke in colourless tones as Capel's sense of unreality heightened. Picael leant a little closer.

"You should be worried about the party of soldiers who are waiting to arrest you at Fourways airport. Worried about the three members of the underpolice who have been following you since you entered Peach City aerodrome. When we land, you will walk towards the exit of this plane with one of them before you and two behind. On the landing apron you will be ever so discretely surrounded by men in grey and gently herded away from the crowds and into the back of a lorry. You will then be driven out into the countryside and shot in the head as an enemy of the state."

No emotion showed in Picael's wide face as she spoke. Her straight black hair framed her tanned complexion giving her a slightly unworldly look.

A moment's lengthening silence. Capel stared at Picael's cold eyes, searching for the joke. There was nothing there. Capel's self-control was also excellent, however. Practically bred into her. She gazed coolly back at Picael.

"And why, may I ask?"

Picael leant across and tapped the manila folder on the table before Capel.

"Because of that. You can't expect to walk into the

nation's oldest university and give that lecture in the current political climate without there being some repercussions, surely?"

Capel frowned. "How do you know what's in my folder?"

Expression returned to Picael's face. Her thin lips made a moue. "I don't know the exact details. What I do know is that the State wants you dead. I'm here to help you."

"But I don't understand. My work is controversial, definitely, but if anything it is a warning to the State, not an attempt to destroy it. Besides, this is Caletptria. We don't kill people for expressing their opinion."

Picael's wide face broke into a smile. The epicanthic fold above her narrow eyes creased in delight.

"Oh, Capel doe Mistletoe." She emphasized the *doe*. "Don't be so naïve. Your family has money *and* influence." She reached out and felt the lapel of Capel's jacket.

"This flight outfit must have cost at least 500 dollars. Orange leather and white piping; that's so the mode in Fourways, is it not?" Picael let go of the material. "And matching shoes and hand luggage, I notice. Your father owns land outside the city of Merliosta: a city that he helped to build, don't you know? Your mother has a chair at Elvdon. How can you possibly *not* know the way that the world works?"

Capel stared at Picael coolly. "If you know me that well you will also know that I all I achieved was done without my family's help."

"Oh yes," agreed Picael. "So your family allows you to think, anyway."

Fire flashed in Capel's eyes. Picael interrupted before she could reply.

"The ugly daughter. I saw the looks on the faces of the other passengers as you walked on the plane. I knew what they were thinking when they saw you. 'What a waste. Five-hundred-dollar suit and a face like that.'"

Capel gasped at Picael's bluntness, but Picael leant close and tapped her accusingly on the chest.

"But you knew it too, didn't you? And you like it, in a perverse way. It confirms you as an outcast. But it's not just because of your looks, is it? It's because you know better, you think you know the deeper truth and they don't. That's what makes you so blind that you think you can deliver your little talk with impunity. Well, you're wrong. We land in 45 minutes. Are you going to do what I tell you, or are you going to die because of what you have in here?" She touched the manila folder.

Capel gave Picael a thin smile. "There is nothing in there but the Standard History. Every school child owns a copy. All I intend to do is to teach people where to read between the lines. Shooting me will not suppress the truth; it is written all around us, we are living in it! The truth is so big and obvious that I'm amazed no one saw it before. The entire history of Caletptria has been manipulated. Someone or something is making us the way we are!"

Picael gave a patient smile. "And you can't see that the State would find that upsetting?" She rolled her eyes. "You shouldn't be allowed out on your own."

She looked at the wall clock. "We land in 43 minutes. You'll be dead in 50. Why not let me read what's in that file?"

Capel spoke in matter-of-fact tones. "You already know what's in there. As I said; it's the first thing they taught you at school."

This is the story of Cal's people.

Cal was a strong woman: solid and with stamina. Not very bright, but she possessed the cunning that makes a good leader. Better than that, she recognized the value of people, and could manipulate them to her own ends and to those of her tribe. For most of the time those two ends were the same, and that is about as much as you can hope for in a leader.

Cal became leader of the people on the death of Hag, who died with honour fighting the Eastpeople. In those days the Eastpeople found it preferable to plunder the farming land of others than to work to restore their empire to its former glory, but this is a story that is forever told. The mothers and fathers build the land, and the children grow idle on the spoils of their parents' hard work.

Now, Hag was a brave man and a hero, but while glory and sacrifice make a good captain, they do not make a good leader. At the time of his death, Hag's people were already hungry and short of number. Cal's first task as leader was to restore a village that had been brought to near-death through rape and pillage. The best of the youths had been taken or killed, the women were weeping. Cal wept too for her own violation, but only briefly. Winter was approaching and all the food that could be carried had been taken from the stores. The village's Herder Spider had been captured and led away; the People's pitifully thin livestock had naturally followed it. Only the seed remained untouched, for the Eastpeople hoped that by its use the village would live on to be plundered in future years.

Fel was a young woman then: childhood still showed in her eyes, in the bloom of her skin. Cal wrapped her naked body in a blanket and took her to the remains of the hall. The thatch was burned, the wood charred; only the Mother's Iron, last symbol of the village's former prosperity, remained. Fel's father lay where he had died, defending Fel's mother, the blood spilling from his neck and soaking into dark earth. A more imaginative, a less honest leader would have promised that it would end there, but Cal would only speak the truth.

"The bruises will heal, Fel. Next time we will see them in time to run and hide."

It was at that time that the stranger in their midst revealed himself. He spoke in an accent unknown to Cal's people.

"No, Cal. Next time, it will be the Eastpeople who run and hide."

Cal drew away from Fel to face the stranger who had entered the hall unseen. He was a short man with dark, straight hair. He was dressed simply in a much weather-stained Riderfolk cloak and boots. He wore no jewellery and carried a leather bag sewn in the style of the Eastpeople. The remnants of Cal's people gradually filed into the dark space of the hall, curious at the dark stranger, scenting either further sorrow or revenge.

"What's your name, stranger? We may be defeated by the Eastpeople, but we are not helpless."

"My name is Stana," said the stranger. Fel thought his words confident; Cal later said that his heart held a deeper nervousness, but he concealed it well. It was known that Cal's strength was to judge people and to use their purpose to her own and so Fel believed that Cal told the truth.

Cal's command was one day old, yet her voice was high and proud. "And why are you here? Why do you seek to spread lies and raise false hope amongst my people?"

"I do not seek to spread lies, nor do I raise false hope. I hold in my sack the deliverance of your people."

Now Cal knew that every gift has its price, but she sensed the truth in the stranger's words, even if she did not understand the reason for his largesse. Moreover, she saw the truth of his character: that Stana was a strong man. A man who would not turn lightly from his goals; be they dangerous or distasteful. But she saw deeper. Something or someone drove this man, and he was not happy to be so driven. That was good, thought Cal. If someone else could drive so strong a man, then so could she. And it would be so much easier if he were unhappy following the course he currently rode.

She pushed forward Fel. Young, attractive Fel, who stood barely out of childhood.

"Fel. Bring Stana to what remains of my hut. I will organize things here and join him as soon as I can."

She saw the way Stana looked at Fel and suppressed a smile of satisfaction. She had judged his tastes well.

Picael put down the folder and looked at Capel.

"Okay, you were telling the truth. This is the Standard History. I learnt this at school. I still know a lot of it by heart."

"Really?" said Capel. She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then continued. "That is a problem, though. Every child believes that they learn the history of how our State was born; yet that is not what is written here. This is a breathtaking feat of misdirection. Even now I struggle to see the full extent. I feel like the woman who searches the forest for the trees."

Picael did not seem to be listening. She pressed the button in her seat arm and the steward arrived, immaculate in his white jacket.

"I'd like a glass of Carrenth tea, please. Capel?"

"Just a glass of water, thank you."

The steward nodded his head and moved away. Picael turned to Capel. She seemed suddenly tired.

"Capel, what you believe about the History is irrelevant to me. What is important is that the State considers you such a threat that it wants you dead."

Picael rubbed her eyes. The high-pitched shrieking of the rocket engines filled the space between them. Picael spoke softly. "That means you are useful to us."

Capel frowned. "Useful to who? Just who are you working for?"

"That's irrelevant."

The steward reappeared with Picael's Carrenth tea, which she accepted with thanks, waving away the tiny glass of ether that accompanied it. Capel took her glass of water, looking at Picael's hands with interest as she did so. Picael noticed what she was looking at, but pointedly

ignored her.

"Anyway," said Picael. "We have 35 minutes. Tell me. Where is your proof that someone has manipulated our history?"

"I haven't got proof," said Capel, matter-of-factly. "Not the heart of it. Not yet. So far I can only spot the edges of something. The hints, the inconsistencies. Enough to convince me that something is not right. Someone is manipulating our society, and it begins with Stana. He makes me think of the gamesmaster in a round of *Civilizations*. Almost as if we were living within the game ourselves."

"That's a bit far-fetched,"

"Maybe," said Capel. She looked insulted.

Picael sipped her tea. "So what are the inconsistencies? The hints?"

Capel lay back in the leather seat. The plane had reached cruising height already. Red streamers of cloud slipped by beneath them. The lesser moon could be seen hanging yellow, just above the horizon. The almost painful vibration of the engines crept into her body through her legs, her buttocks, her back. Her mouth and sinuses were dry. Any flight on a stratorocket left you disoriented. One when you faced possible execution at the end did not help matters. Picael's insistent questioning made her uneasy too. Her whole manner reminded her of someone. Was she being tested in some way?

"Well?" said Picael, "What makes you suspicious?"

Capel sat up straight. She was a Mistletree. Damned if she was going to be intimidated by some woman who looked as if she could barely afford the plane ticket. She spoke.

"Inconsistencies? Okay. I'll tell you. Firstly there is the form of the History: it's written in prose."

"So?"

"So up until Cal and Stana's time a history was something that was learned by rote. It dealt with lineages and lists of battles won and little else. The Standard History reads almost like a novel."

"Everything has to start somewhere. Cal's people encouraged innovation..."

"...and ideas made the State." Capel completed the quote. "I know. If you'd read the scrolls of Assass or the pictograms of the Norren you'd have a better idea of what I meant. Do you know that Cal is the first real person in history? She is portrayed with strengths and weaknesses, not as an idealized portrait. Compare her character with that of Go, the Norren Warrior King."

She sighed. "Then there is the form of the prose. There is a sarcasm, a cynicism, a sophistication there that was never before written down."

Picael looked carefully at Capel. "If you say so. You are the expert."

"I am. The whole History is just too well formed. But that's just the beginning. What really interests me are the misdirections..."

"The misdirections. You mentioned them before..." There was a note of interest in Picael's voice, now. Capel gazed from the window, gathering her thoughts. Ribbons of cloud flowed above the grey mass of the Rondal mountains. She turned back to Picael.

"That is the basis of my lecture. Here's a question for you

and your schoolgirl memories. What was the secret of Cal's people's success? What was it that Stana brought them?"

"The secret of iron, of course."

Capel shook her head. "No. That's just what they would have us believe. That wasn't what came out of Stana's sack."

"I've heard it said that the sack was just a metaphor."

"No. The sack was just another misdirection. How long before we land?"

"Thirty-one minutes."

"How are you going to get me past security?"

"You'll see." Picael finished her tea.

"Okay. You play your games, I'll play mine. Read the History. And every time you read about Stana's sack, think about what is not being mentioned."

Cal's people sat in a circle around the forge that Stana had built. Around them lay the piles of material that Stana had had them collect – charcoal, limestone, redrock: iron ore. Stana had the people break the ore with hammers and then roast it in fire. Cal wore a look of interest, and this was enough to cause the rest of the tribe to adopt the same expression. Fel watched Stana with pride in her face. Her belly was already swollen. Clever Cal to know how to tie Stana to the People.

"You already know of iron," said Stana.

"The Mother's Iron girds our hall," said one of the People.

Stana nodded. His black hair was longer than when he first arrived, tied back in a plait now in the manner of the People.

"No longer will you buy iron. Now you will make it for yourself, and grow rich and strong."

The People looked on in respectful silence.

Stana laughed. "Indeed you have already made iron! This area is littered with iron ore. Redrock, you call it. You will have stacked it around your cooking fires. Have you never found lumps of iron at the bottom of the cooking pit as it cools?"

There were murmurs from the people. Stana's forge glowed red about the base. The smell of something exciting came from within: though they did not know it yet, it was the smell of the future.

Stana gestured proudly towards his creation. "In this furnace I have created a fire far hotter than your cooking fires. I have added redrock and limestone. The limestone will help the redrock to give up its hold on the precious metal. Already iron is forming below the slag at the bottom of the forge." Stana gripped his leather sack tightly as he spoke. "This is my gift to Cal's people. When the raiders return they will find not a weak, unarmed tribe; but rather a people armed with daggers and swords, trained in the arts of war."

The people's eyes were wide as they listened to this. At the time their hopes were of nothing more than a year to pass unmolested by outsiders, but it was then that the seeds of a dream were laid. Rather, their capacity to dream was expanded just a little.

Night fell, and the forge glowed red in the dark. Stana had opened a hole in its base and allowed the slag to run

free and cool.

Later he smashed the slag with a hammer that he took from his leather sack, and beat together the metal that was broken free from the mess. The people looked on in silent awe.

This was the birth of Fourways village, birthplace of the State of Caletptria.

"Their capacity to dream was expanded just a little?" said Capel incredulously. "Nothing like that is written in the Norren history."

Picael gave a dismissive gesture. "The peoples of this continent vary greatly in characteristics, both physical and mental. Stana was obviously of an intelligent breed."

Capel grinned. "No doubt. You know, if you examine the History, there are many cases of people such as Stana turning up at just the right time. People with above-average intelligence, people with an epicanthic fold to their brow."

Picael laughed. "It is not uncommon in people of this continent. I display both of those characteristics myself."

Capel laughed too. Still smiling, she spoke: "Is it common in Alaharia, too? Picael, why is a Second Continent spy trying to help me?"

Picael's smile froze for just a fraction of a second, but she recovered smoothly. "Okay, clever of you to realize. How?"

"You know the Standard History by heart. That's a little unusual. You're trying too hard to fit in. What I don't understand is what game you are playing with me."

Picael's face was deadly serious now. "I'm not playing a game. I said there were three people on this plane who were watching you. Actually, there is a fourth person. Me. I was part of the Caletptrian team detailed to escort you to Fourways, to ensure that your arrest on landing went smoothly. Fortunate for you that an Alharian double agent was picked to lead the team."

Capel said nothing, marshalling her thoughts. The shrieking note of the engines changed. The plane had begun its descent.

"What's the matter?" asked Picael.

"I'm not a traitor. I believe in Caletptria. I would not betray it to the Second Continent."

"Even if Caletptria was betraying you? Don't worry, Capel, I would not ask you to. All I intend to do is to escort you to the University. No one would dare arrest you there. It would just draw attention to your ridiculous theories."

"If my theories are so ridiculous, why do you want me to reveal them?"

"Anything that destabilizes the Caletptrian government is a good thing, as far as we are concerned," smiled Picael.

Capel drew a deep breath. "Then I won't do it. I don't want a war with Alharia. I'm not going to do your work for you."

She looked around the cabin of the stratorocket. The seats were only half full. Mostly titled folk, a few merchants rich enough to afford the ticket price. There was an air of quiet calm, smoothly kept on track by the stewards who moved discreetly through the cabin tending to the passengers' needs. The cabin's interior seemed to

Capel a microcosm of all that was good about Caletptria. Technical advancement, comfort and purpose, calm efficiency and order. The thought that someone such as Picael should seek to destroy all that was almost beyond belief. And yet, the thought that she was identified as a source of destabilization? That she was slated to be murdered? Was it true, or was it all an elaborate charade perpetrated by Picael? Capel made up her mind.

"I don't believe you," she said. "I don't know what you are playing at, but I'm not going to help you by deviating from my intended path by so much as a centimetre. I do not intend to listen to you for another minute."

"Then you're a dead woman," replied Picael. Without further explanation, she got up from her chair and moved down the aisle to another vacant seat, leaving Capel sitting alone and suddenly very, very worried. According to the green hands of the clock at the front of the cabin, they were due to land in 19 minutes.

Stana watched the people as they formed ragged lines.

"You're looking worried," said Cal, appearing at his shoulder.

"I'm confident," said Stana, but he didn't sound it.

"I hope so," said Cal. "Summer is here, soon it will be autumn, and then the Eastpeople will return. Are you confident enough that the People can defend Fel's honour? Will they hold the line that guards your child? Iron weapons are not enough. The people need iron will."

"I'm confident," said Stana, but his eyes wandered to Fel, with Felma in a bundle at her back as she picked her way towards the cooking fires. A few wild cattle, caught in the hills, were penned up beyond them. Maybe soon a Herder Spider would move in to tend them, and the People could once again build up their livestock reserves. The village was regaining strength, but would it be enough?

He clapped his hands together. The ragged groups of the warriors in training looked towards him.

"No!" he called, "Come on! We must practice this again! Think! The Eastpeople are riding down upon you. They will pick you off one by one. How can you defend yourself? By forming a line! You must stand together or die apart. Now, form a line! We will continue to practise all night if we must!"

He watched Cal as she walked to join Fel.

"I'm confident," he repeated to himself, "but..."

Capel was anything but confident. She looked up from her file, from the big and, to her, all-too-obvious clue that lay in that passage, and gazed at the back of Picael's head, four rows up the plane, willing her to come back. Twice she almost left her seat to go and sit by her, but both times she forced herself to stop. Could she trust Picael? Was she telling the truth? It was all too incredible. If she thought about it logically, however, it was likely she was telling the truth. Which meant that if Capel were to live, it would be as a spur to the seemingly inevitable war between the two Continents.

The high-pitched shriek of the rockets cut out with a suddenness that made Capel jump. A few seconds silence as the passengers hung in nervous freefall and then the

roar of the jets cut in. There was a whine and a bump as the undercarriage unfolded itself. They would be landing in Fourways airport in a few minutes. What should Capel do? One option would be to call for help right now, here on the plane. To denounce Picael as a spy and demand that the police were summoned. Break down and act hysterically, make enough of a fuss that she could not be quietly shepherded away by the underpolice. If the underpolice were really on board. If they really were waiting for her at the airport.

She couldn't do it. Couldn't stand the embarrassment if she was wrong. Picael would just deny it. It was ridiculous, she thought. She was going to die for the sake of her dignity. Through the window she could see the edges of the city of Fourways: the wide, well-planned streets that sectioned off the older town with its copper roofs and onion domes. Fourways. It was a beautiful city: named for its place on the crossroads of the continent. From Peach City to the East and Merliosta to the west, Cariolenburg to the north and Ice Town to the south, all the goods and messages that travelled on the trains and telegraphs passed through the heart of the State. And now she had returned there. Returned to her home.

And maybe her death.

There was a bump as the plane touched down. A green border of grass could be seen rushing by the window. In the distance were the red mountains where Cal and her people had mined iron as they prepared for their end at the hands of the Eastpeople. They shouldn't have fought. There was no need for it. They risked everything because of the word of a stranger.

Capel gave a little giggle that was entirely without humour. Was she about to do the same? There was still time to make a scene... But she couldn't do it. Picael was right: she was the ugly woman. A lifetime of catching people just turning their heads from her had left her with an aversion to making a scene.

The plane had slowed to taxiing speed. The modern white buildings of the terminus could be seen. The other passengers were already standing up and collecting together their things. And now the plane had stopped and they were popping open the ridiculously small door that the passengers had to stoop to make their way through. Beyond the door in a patch of blue daylight, Capel could see the metal steps that led to the ground.

Now Capel felt fear: her hands tightened on the manila file as she noted the three people Picael had pointed out moving to surround her. One to the front with Picael, two behind.

She ducked through the hatch, the metal skin of the airframe still warm to the touch. Below on the concrete apron she could see the busy movement. The bright colours of the passengers, the dark blue of the ground staff and the milling grey suits that moved without going anywhere. There was a roar and movement stilled as an olive-drab rocket ship took off from the far runway, tilting its nose back as it began the vicious loop that would take it through the stratosphere, over to the Second Continent. The crowd watched it go and then seemed to relax

as it resumed its activity. Capel clattered down the steps. The grey suits were moving in. Ahead, Picael spoke to the woman on her left and then walked quickly forward to meet the man in charge of the suits. Capel descended the ladder to the warm concrete of the apron and strode determinedly for the terminal, but a gentle wave of grey suits enveloped her and pushed her off course, led her away from the other passengers and towards the waiting green lorry. Fear rose inside her, but she had no choice but to walk on. Walk on to her death.

Her senses were heightened; she felt the flight bag as it rubbed against her leather skirt, the white piping, the matching orange shoes, the warmth of a spring afternoon and the cold ache of fear inside her. But now the escort was stopping, Picael was speaking urgently to the leader of the group and Capel finally overheard her words.

"It isn't her!"

The leader looked Capel up and down. A short man, heavysset, with a sarcastic expression. His voice, however, was smooth and refined.

"She matches the description we were sent," he said. "She's certainly ugly enough."

"I don't care. I spoke to her on the plane. It's not doe Mistletoe."

The leader snatched the folder from her hand and opened it. "Look, it is the History. Who else could it be?"

Picael gave an exasperated sigh. "Do you think I didn't check the folder? It contains the History and nothing else. She is a school teacher."

"She's very well dressed for a school teacher."

"She's also very well connected. Doing her service to the community, like all her sort do. Look at her passport, you fool, before you get us all in trouble."

The leader held Picael's gaze for several seconds before holding out his hand to Capel.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Madam. Could I see your passport please?"

Capel was cool. "And who might you be?"

The leader pulled a card from his pocket bearing his photograph and the State Arms. "I'm the person who is asking for your passport," he said.

Capel's heart was pounding, but she maintained her cool. She reached into her flight bag, pulled out her passport and handed it across to the leader. He opened it and his face hardened. He looked at Picael and then back to Capel, and then he licked his lips. Capel forced herself to stand a little straighter. If she were to die, it would be with dignity.

The leader spoke. "I'm terribly sorry, doe Trielopret. Very sorry indeed. We appear to have made a mistake,"

Already the crowd of grey suits was evaporating. Capel found herself standing, confused, in a widening circle of people.

Soon there was just her, the leader and Picael. But how? She saw Picael's amused expression and realized. Picael had switched passports. When?

Picael looked at the leader and shook her head. "I tried to warn you – doe Mistletoe must have caught an earlier flight."

The leader looked annoyed. "How? What is wrong with

Intelligence?" He spat at the ground. "Someone is going to be in big trouble over this." He looked at Capel suspiciously, and Capel felt her stomach flip again. She wasn't safe yet.

Picael took her arm. "Perhaps this isn't the time, Torana," she said smoothly. "Maybe after I have escorted doe Trielopret to the terminal and explained the situation?"

The leader stared at Capel a moment longer, then nodded slowly. "Perhaps you're right. And then report straight back to control. We need to sort out this mess." He turned on his heel and stalked quickly off across the concrete.

Capel found herself being supported by Picael. She drew herself up with effort. "Thank you," she said. "I can walk unaided now."

"As you wish."

Capel felt regenerated by the warmth of the afternoon sun. The clean white lines of the terminal building, the modernity of the fenestration, the smell of kerosene and fresh-cut grass, all these strengthened the feeling that she had arrived home. She could think more clearly. She retreated to the familiar sanctuary of analytical thought.

"That passport must have been good to fool that man. It speaks well of your organization."

Picael said nothing. Relief was bubbling inside Capel. She couldn't stop speaking. "How did you know that I wouldn't want to play any part in your plan? How did you know to plant it on me? How could you be sure I would act the way I did?"

"The psychoanalytical process," said Picael, a touch of pride in her voice. "We weren't sufficiently convinced that you would believe us, so we devised a plan to take that situation into account."

"Psychoanalysis?" said Capel. "I've heard of that. I'm not convinced by these new sciences myself."

Picael gave a shrug. They entered the terminal. White squares were laid on the floor, the pattern formed by the sunlight through the windows.

"So," said Capel, "what would you have me do now?"

"Nothing. I will simply deliver you to the university. There you can deliver your lecture for me."

"I'm not doing it for you."

"Oh, you are."

The Eastpeople returned in autumn, just after the harvest had been collected.

Cal walked out to meet them, bearing green branches as a sign of peace. The leader of the Eastpeople reined in his spider-mount and looked down from the saddle. The beast watched Cal too with its eight yellow eyes and two disturbingly intelligent red ones.

"Speak," said the leader.

Cal looked up at him. Not a tall man, but with very shrewd eyes. He had lost a finger from his right hand: the remaining two were loosely wound around the reins of his mount. She thought she recognized something in his character: it held a mirror to her own. A dangerous man.

She spat on the ground.

"Look towards the village," she called loudly, "My people are forming a shield wall. Charge it, and you will die. Abandon your attack, join us, and you will live. We have

food. We are short of men due to your previous raids, but this is not time to think of the past. Your skill with your mounts could be of benefit to us. If we join together our peoples will be stronger.”

The Eastpeople laughed, as Cal had known they would. Still, Stana was insistent that the offer be made. When the fight turned against the Eastpeople they would remember the offer. It would sap their resolve to fight.

The Eastpeople's leader bowed his head slightly. His spider-mount raised two legs and replaced them on the grass, then did the same with the next pair, and the next. It sensed its rider's mood.

“Kill her,” said the leader.

Cal had been expecting this. The iron dagger had already left her hand; she was already running back towards the People. The dagger bounced harmlessly from the leader's arm, for in those days they had not learned how to weight a knife for throwing.

Now it takes time for a rider on a mount to get it moving. Over short distances a woman can outrun a spider, and Cal was already pushing her way into the centre of the People's shield wall, the iron-tipped spears were lowering, the iron-bound shields slotting into place, each overlapping its neighbour. The People stood shoulder to shoulder, their legs firm in the ground.

“If one of us breaks from the wall, we all die,” called Stana above the soft percussion of the approaching riders. “If one of us runs, we all die. We stand together or die apart.”

The words were embedded in the People's consciousness, drummed in by a summer spent drilling and drilling and drilling. They stood between the earth and stone banks that led down from the hills into their village and waited...

And the Eastpeople died on Stana's Iron.

Picael closed the manila folder. The taxi picked its way through the narrow streets that drew tightly around the walls of the university.

“Do you see the clue there?” asked Capel.

Picael shrugged. “Cal's people won. They had superior weaponry. And from them grew the state of Caletptria. Next year it will celebrate its 500th anniversary.”

“Next year it will be smashed: broken by war with the Second Continent.”

Picael shook her head. “To hear such sedition. I thought that Caletptria ruled by divine right?”

Capel looked tired. “You know I'm right, Picael. You must know something, or why would you be helping me? The forces that have protected Caletptria are about to turn against it.”

Picael shook her head again. “Capel, I believe in nothing more than the inevitability of the war that has been building between the old and the new worlds for the past 200 years, and the consequent need for a fresh start. Caletptria has dominated the world's affairs for too long. I say that it is time for a new power to gain ascendancy. You talk of our history being shaped. I say that history must have some shape. You're merely experiencing the weak anthropic principle. You look at any 500-year

stretch of history...”

“Why 500 years?” interrupted Capel. “In 2,000 years the Norren Empire did not advance by as much as any ten years of the Caletptrian State. In 500 years we have gone from the forging of iron to that of metals that do not even exist outside a nuclear reactor. Is such a rate of growth feasible?”

“Who is to say?” said Picael, innocently.

“I am to say,” said Capel, angrily. “Iron is a misdirection. It was placed in the History to distract the eye, as a conjuror will cause the audience's attention to focus on his left hand whilst his right holds the coin. Do you know why iron shaped the history of Cal's People? Not because Stana showed them how to forge it. The secret of iron wasn't a secret, even in those days. Cal's People thrived because iron ore is so much more freely available than copper or tin. They lived in an area rich with ore and so could produce many more weapons than the Eastpeople ever could with their limited access to ore.”

Picael shrugged. “So? Stana obviously headed for an area rich in ore. If Stana existed, of course. The first furnaces would be built in iron-rich areas. Perhaps Stana was just the personification of a natural force.”

Capel looked at Picael with new respect. “I'm impressed. I thought that myself once,” for a moment she gazed into the middle distance, lost in memories, “...but no. Stana was a real person. A clever person. Clever enough to hide in the foreground of history. I sometimes wonder if that was deliberate. He made himself out to be larger than life...”

The taxi began to pull up outside the main gates to the university. Through the iron-bound double doors stood the skeleton of the giant spider. Capel had walked beneath it many times before, crossed the chequered tiles beneath the span of its legs on her way to a lecture or a drinks party. Once those creatures had herded the other animals of the planet; semi-intelligent, they had been the pinnacle of evolution. And then, for some reason, they had died out, vanished overnight. Now the yellow bones of what had been one of the rulers of prehistory were arranged to form an arch in the entrance hall. A once-proud species brought low. Where once they controlled whole lands, now their smaller cousins had to be content herding areas the size of fields. The parallels of the spiders' fate and that which would engulf Caletptria were all too obvious.

Picael tapped on the glass and made the driver continue down the street.

“We'll go in through the kitchens. Torana may have some people watching the gate. If he has any sense he will, anyway.”

Picael held up the manila folder, apparently pointing something out to Capel, in actuality hiding her face from the man in the grey suit who stood by the iron lamp-post outside the main entrance.

Capel continued speaking, oblivious to this movement. “Anyway, I told you. The story of iron is a misdirection. Look what else Stana brought. An understanding of tactics. The knowledge of how to motivate an army. Do you know how much discipline it takes to make people stand

in a shield wall?"

"Cal was a strong leader. She had the discipline,"

"True, but discipline must be learned. It takes more than a strong leader to make people keep the line of a shield wall. They have to drill, and drill again. Haven't you been listening to me? Stana brought something else in that sack. Something more important than the recipe for iron. Something that isn't written in the History, but is described by every page."

"What?"

Capel gave a smile. They were approaching the back entrance. A butcher's van was pulled up outside, two women in white coats streaked with blood unloaded the carcasses of pigs. The taxi pulled up and as it did so Capel said:

"Time."

Picael paid the driver and they climbed out. Pink carcasses rattled by on rails; there was the smell of raw meat carried on the warm evening air.

"Time," repeated Capel. "That's what's hidden in the History. Where did Cal's people get the time to collect ore? Where did they find the time to make the iron, to work it into weapons, to train and practice in their use? The People were subsistence farmers until Stana arrived. They spent all their time in growing the food they needed to eat to survive, just like all the other tribes in the area. Stana brought the gift of time in that leather sack of his, and then tried to conceal it from view."

Picael was interested despite herself. They moved from the cold room into the stainless steel and white tiles of a kitchen. They walked past long lines of busy cooks.

"How could Stana carry time in sack?" she said.

Capel picked something up from a nearby counter. One of the cooks made to say something, then noted the way she was dressed and was quiet. Capel held up the object she had just taken.

"Like this," said Capel. "Most likely the seeds."

Picael was thoroughly confused. "It's just a potato."

"Not just a potato. It contains nearly four times as much energy as any other crop Cal's people could have grown. They had to work less hard in order to eat, they had more time for other pursuits. Just a potato. Potatoes didn't even exist until Stana arrived. They are not mentioned in any record. Wheat, rice, barley, cabbages, yes. Potatoes, no."

Capel passed the potato to Picael as they walked through a door that led into a tiled corridor. She watched as Picael took it. Watched carefully.

"Stana was a clever man," said Picael softly.

"I'm sure he was. But think of this: that a man with the knowledge of iron, tactics, basic nutrition and, what is more, the wisdom on how to apply all these just happened to turn up and want to help a no-hope tribe at just the right time for the repercussions to ripple through the entire world... It *could* just be a coincidence. But coincidences like Stana are written throughout the Standard History."

Picael gave a dismissive shrug. "They're still just coincidences, Capel. You've no proof otherwise."

"You have five fingers, Picael. Just like Stana. You hide yourself right under our noses."

"Having an extra finger is not unknown, Capel." Picael's

voice was soft, almost lost against the echoing of their feet in the tiled corridor. "Genetic variation increases in the lands south of the old Norren empire. That's where our species evolved, after all."

"I know," said Capel. "And I wonder about a people that could have evolved, rather like the Herder Spiders. A people who infiltrate other tribes and take control. The Herder Spiders were just intelligent enough to defend a territory and move their flocks to better feeding grounds. Imagine if they had been as intelligent as we are?"

Picael smiled at her. "Imagine," she said. They had reached the end of the corridor. Picael pushed open the door to the lecture theatre, the light wood warm to her touch.

She ushered Capel through the door. The audience rose to their feet at the sight of her, a mark of respect. Capel looked back at the door. Picael gave a five-fingered wave and then allowed the door to swing shut. The audience resumed their seats, Capel opened her mouth, and the ugly truth hit her, silencing her for a moment.

She had been manoeuvred into this position, standing like a puppet in front of the expectant audience; just as countless others had been throughout the History.

Whose words was she really about to speak?

Just what was about to be set in motion?

Tony Ballantyne, who lives in Oldham, Lancashire, and has published many stories in this magazine over the past few years, has some good news to pass on to us all: "I've sold my first novel! *Recursion* will be published by Tor UK in 2004. It is set in the same universe as my *Interzone* stories 'Restoring the Balance' and 'The Sixth VNM'."

interzone

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Give Them The Moon

Martha A. Hood



What follow are excerpts from statements given April 16th through the 20th, 2059, by the participants known as "Paolo," "Chu Hwa," "Ammon," and "Tiyo," and statement / responses by Moonbeam Enterprises, Inc., in response to the investigation undertaken by the International Space Agency.

Moonbeam Enterprises does not recognize the ISA's authority to investigate the recent events at their lunar station known as Moon House. They contend as well that the answers to all of the ISA's questions are a matter of public record. They have agreed, therefore, to send their statement only in the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), all of which have appeared previously in other media. As submitted, the FAQ appear to have been generated by a variety of company sources and it is impossible to attribute any statement to any particular company official. Although there are minor bits of repetition, and a few minor internal contradictions, the FAQ seem to have been run through an editing program, resulting in a fairly fluent read.

It is worth noting that all of the participants were allowed to watch vids of Give Them the Moon as an aid to memory.

Paolo's Statement

I was by myself in the greenhouse part of Moon House when the alien light first appeared. It was the beginning of our eighth lunar night, which meant we had been on the

moon, oh, I forget how many weeks. Because of my affliction, I couldn't do as much of the science stuff as the others did on the show. The one task I could do on my own was the gardening, so I spent my working time there. For some reason, I didn't have a problem in the garden with sequencing tasks, which I did have with everything else. I wasn't sure why remembering things to do in the garden was so easy, but it was almost as though the plants themselves knew what they needed and reminded me what to do.

I had set down my watering bottle, when something caught my eye. Some kind of light was shining outside the glasstic, on the surface of the Moon. It was the beginning of the lunar night. The moonscape was all shadowy, but there was a lot of Earthshine. I went to the great window, which was the clear part of the glasstic, and tried to get a better view. The day/night lighting for the greenhouse was automatic, and I couldn't adjust it, or I would have turned the lights out to cut the glare. But dimming wasn't needed, not at all. I could see columns of light, dancing all over the place and they were, maybe, 20 metres away from me.

Panic got me for a moment, and I backed away. I get freaky with anything I can't figure out. I took another step back and kicked a watering bottle. It flew and hit a trellis.

The light changed. The individual strands kind of clumped up together until they were a single column.

The video shows me coming forward, but I don't remember doing that.

The light formed into the shape of a man. That I remember. Details emerged. Fingers. Ears. A nose, eyes, and a mouth. I backed away again. It did, too. That was when I realized it was copying me.

I used to be able to cope with surprises, but not since my accident. I wanted to go get the others; they would know better what to do, I thought. But I couldn't stop looking at it while it stood so still itself, looking at me.

It must have gotten bored then, because it held my shape for only a few seconds more and then it spread apart again. It moved away, across the lunar surface, up and over the rim of our crater.

I watched it go, then wondered if it might be from the producers, you know, of the show? Maybe ratings were down or something. I found one of the cameras and I looked into it. You can see how I stared into it for a while. I guess I expected Moonbeam Enterprises to explain it to me, but that was foolish. We seemed to have a different producer every day, so there was no one to talk to, ever, who knew any more than we did. Moonbeam Enterprises always said it wasn't their job to explain things. They were only putting on a show of geeks on the moon, and viewers got to vote on who they thought was the best survivor. At least, that's what a producer told me, once, when I asked about it.

FAQ

Q: It has been reported that Moonbeam Enterprises was not aware of the light anomaly until some hours after Paolo first encountered it. Can you tell us if that is true, and, if so, why?

A: It is true that no one at Moonbeam actually watched the first encounter in real time. We first found out about the incident when a some viewers contacted us with the message that Paolo had seen something on the lunar surface.

Q: That seems odd. Didn't you need to follow what the contestants each did very closely?

A: Remember, there were five contestants, and five cameras, on almost 16 hours a day. We usually had someone monitoring the screens, but that doesn't mean eyes glued to the action 24/7. People do blink. People look away sometimes. And remember, you couldn't really see anything. Just Paolo, standing around, gawking. And before he was gawking, he was gardening. Watching a guy gardening isn't that exciting.

Q: What was the company's monitor watching, if not Paolo?

A: Well, one of the four others, perhaps. Chu Hwa was working; so was Ammon. Veda and Tiyo were having sex, it looks like. Almost anything would have been more interesting than watching Paolo garden.

Q: When your viewers alerted you to Paolo's encounter, what did you do?

A: We took a look, naturally. We have the greatest respect for our viewers. Viewers' tips have alerted us to many crises on our various lifestyle adventure programmes.

Q: In your evaluation of the incident, did Paolo's status

as a mentally challenged individual make a difference in your handling of it?

A: "Mentally challenged" is not the correct term. Paolo's intelligence matches that of any of the others on the show. High intelligence was an absolute prerequisite for consideration of contestants. Nonetheless, it is true that certain simple mental tasks were difficult or impossible for him.

Gardening, fortunately, gave him no difficulties. And he did valuable, pioneering work in lunar agriculture. This is another aspect of Moonbeam Enterprises that is worth noting. Yes, we have our corporate profits, and yes, our winning contestants get prizes, but the entire human race also benefits from our research projects, the raw data of which are available to anyone in the world.

Q: What is the proper term for Paolo's condition?

A: Paolo's condition is called "acquired brain trauma."

Q: How did he acquire the trauma?

A: In a motor scooter accident in his native Italy when he was 18 years old.

Q: Medicine has made great strides in treating brain trauma in the last several decades. Why wasn't Paolo helped by these treatments?

A: He was helped. But his injuries were terribly severe. Just a few years ago, he would not have survived them.

Q: What exactly are Paolo's impairments?

A: Paolo's areas of impairment include, but are not limited to: difficulty in processing data, difficulties with linear thinking, memory loss, and inability to respond to new situations.

Chu Hwa's Statement

I was in the kitchen when Paolo found me.

"Something has happened," he said, but he couldn't seem to remember exactly what. He looked both worried and excited. I am an old woman, and he is very young, and not right in the head. I am sorry but his slowness sometimes made me very weary. I always tried to be patient with him, but it was difficult, and I wondered how I was going to get through the entire year on the moon with him.

"You need to go to the greenhouse with me," he said.

I asked, "Can you tell me why?" I was comfortable in the kitchen with my beaker of soup and wasn't keen on going anywhere.

He shook his head. "There's something there."

I put my soup gently on the counter. I could see he was stressed. That could mean it was something important, and never mind if he annoyed me. "Okay," I said. "Let's go."

But he asked, "Where are the others?"

We found Veda and Tiyo in Tiyo's quarters. I signed into Veda's hand and she was willing to come right at that moment. Tiyo, though, said he'd page Ammon and tell him. Then they'd come to the greenhouse, too.

Once there, in the greenhouse, Paolo changed. He lost all his uncertainty. He went directly to the Great Window, and practically pressed his nose up against the glass. "It was here and then it left," he said. "I hope it comes back again."

My heart sank; I was sure it was just nonsense in his head, but I took Veda's hand and followed him up there.

It always amazed me, what glasstic was like. So thick against the airlessness and the cold, yet so transparent in its window portions. So I fended off my impatience and watched the pretty shadows on the lunar surface. I signed into Veda's hand what I saw out there. And then, a flash of light, from over the edge of our crater, and I almost broke Veda's hand. I squeezed it so hard, she let out a little squeak.

Outside, the light flowed like water and reformed itself. I saw the three of us, Veda and I linked hand to hand, and Paolo off to one side. We were lit in the sparkliest of lights. Our faces resolved to fine detail. Me, with my cartoon mask, Veda, with her exquisite cheekbones, and Paolo, with his slight, bewildered smile.

FAQ

Q: Chu Hwa and Veda seemed always to stick together, and yet they were such opposites. How did they get to be pals?

A: Veda was beautiful; Chu Hwa was disfigured. Veda was young; Chu Hwa was old. And yet they understood each other. Both women struggled, growing up in male-dominated cultures. Both were afflicted, albeit in different ways.

Chu Hwa suffered from leprosy, a disease almost assigned to the ash heap of history. Although she had received treatment in her native China, she had a mutated form of the disease, and the drugs given her early in life failed to halt the symptoms.

By the time we came into her life, she had lost three fingertips and part of two toes. Her face was disfigured by leprosy and by untreated basal-cell skin cancer. Not until Moonbeam Enterprises selected her as a contestant were we able to get the proper drugs into her and halt the disease. Once she was on the drug, she became non-contagious as well. She almost always wore one of her colourful masks on camera. We agreed with this choice; we felt it heightened the sense of mystery about her, and gave greater impact to her disfigurement, on those occasions when she removed her mask.

She was the oldest of the group. And although high intelligence was a prerequisite for all the contestants, Chu Hwa tested the highest.

Veda was beautiful, but was blind and deaf as the result of a virus, not unlike the famous Helen Keller of the 20th century. The difference, for Veda, was that she was in her teen years when stricken, and therefore retained her language skills.

At the time she was stricken, she was working as a Bollywood film actress. Her film credits include *Madras Masala*, *The Legend of Sari*, and *Circus Karma*. Her disability ended a promising career. Her earnings had been squandered by an unscrupulous manager, and her family was unable to support her. She fell on hard times. She became a prostitute for a while.

As with Paolo and Chu Hwa, we made a huge difference in Veda's life. We in fact committed ourselves

to restoring her sight and hearing, via implants, after the show had run its course.

Ammon's Statement

Veda was supposed to come see me after she got done with Tiyo, but it seemed she had forgotten. I didn't like that.

I remembered there was something about Paolo seeing some weird light or something from the greenhouse, so I went there to look for her. And yeah, there I saw the three of them, Paolo, Veda, and Chu Hwa.

I made my way over to them, but it was tough, because Paolo had left so much gardening shit all over the place. In that low gravity, I was pretty fast on my leg stumps and my one good arm, but I also had a tendency to skid and crash. Sure enough, at the last part, I went out of control and kind of tackled Paolo. He in turn knocked the leper's legs out from under her and she took Veda down, too.

I got up first and climbed onto the stool that gave me the height to look out the window.

What I saw at that point looked like a ball of light. Nothing special. Then it started changing. It turned into a face. Veda got up and grabbed me around the waist and lifted me up. She pressed me against the glasstic. I hate it when she does that. She wouldn't be able to do that on Earth. On Earth, I would be the master of her.

"Look at it!" she said. Her breath was hot on my ear. I was thinking, shit, she couldn't see it, so what was she talking about? But I looked, and it was like looking into a mirror. My face, down to each detail, and Veda's behind me, and her arms, wrapped around my chest.

It melted itself flat and became Paolo's face and Chu Hwa's mask. "Holy shit," I said. I'd just figured out that this light was looking back at us and maybe thinking about us. "Where the fuck's Tiyo?" I said. "Tell him to get his butt in here."

FAQ

Q: Many were surprised that you broadcast pictures of the light so quickly. Some saw your quick response as an indication it was in fact a production of Moonbeam Enterprises and not an alien entity. Care to comment?

A: Moonbeam Enterprises finds it insulting, after all we've contributed to the betterment of humanity, to be accused of perpetrating a hoax. The fact is, once we knew there was something to see, we realigned one of our outside cams. That's it. When there's something to see, we show it. That's our business. It certainly wasn't something we planted there, and I think subsequent events bear me out on that.

Q: There are still persistent rumours that the so-called research "work" done by the contestants was something of a pleasant fiction, that none of them were physically able to do such work. Your response?

A: We're in the middle of the 21st century, and yet such ignorance exists! Look, the main scientific research happening on the moon is in geology. In plain terms, they found, collected, and categorized rocks. Veda used an innovative tactile program to navigate the ATV to go collect the rocks from various sites around Moon House. Because the program was tactile rather

than visual, Veda could operate through the two-week lunar night. As for the others, they had Paolo for heavy lifting and experimental gardening, Chu Hwa and Ammon for sorting and scanning, and Tiyo for computer analysis.

They were highly intelligent, and they all spoke English well enough to talk to each other, and we thoroughly trained them. So what's your problem?

There is nothing particularly new or secret about any of this. It's all a matter of record. But people don't care, it seems, about the serious scientific work of Moon House.

Q: What about ethical concerns that Moonbeam Enterprises exploited the contestants' disabilities for company profit?

A: Never mind our profits; what about theirs? We were offering them the opportunity to exploit themselves – to win a prize that would pull them from their poverty and change their lives forever. And they got to learn new skills and have a great adventure as well.

Even if you could take away their afflictions, it is difficult to say what would have become of them without us. Chu Hwa might have been a middle-level clerk or a schoolteacher. Veda would have probably continued as a film star. Paolo? Perhaps he would have been a petty thief, like so many of the unemployed young men in his town. Ammon would no doubt be involved in the politics and wars of his country, those same politics that cost him his limbs. Tiyo would be a poor man from a poor country. Without cerebral palsy, he would be more able-bodied and would have been recruited into his nation's ragtag army. So don't talk about exploitation!

Q: Why did it take Moonbeam Enterprises so long to come to terms with the alien entity?

A: Whoa, now. We still haven't verified the nature of the light feature. As for coming to terms with it, whatever it was, several decisions came into play. We knew almost immediately that something was there, because we had it on camera. But what was it, exactly? Could it be dangerous to the contestants? Was there a danger of alarming the public, possibly spreading panic? We just didn't know what we were dealing with.

Q: What about charges that your failure to come terms with it put the cast at unnecessary risk which eventually did result in tragedy?

A: Your questions aren't about what happened with the light feature. Not at all. This goes back to the beginning when the critics savaged the show and its concept. They weren't able to stop our success, so they've found other ways to hurt us. The truth is, the confusion surrounding the exact nature of the light event took its toll on our credibility. People expected us to have the answers, and we didn't.

Let's remember what our original goals were. We only wanted to help people; not exploit them. We never wanted to alienate anyone; why should we? We're in the entertainment business!

Tiyo's Statement

Ammon paged me and I left my quarters to go to the

greenhouse. I didn't understand what she was talking about, some business about light. I was tired and I ached, it takes me a long time to get around, and the moon's weak gravity didn't do me and my palsy any favours. Anyway, Paolo is always getting things backwards. If it is only him saying something, I don't go. But Chu Hwa is a smart old woman, so I go.

I arrived at the greenhouse and everyone was there and the light was there. Right away, it lit up the inside of my skull and made me wish I was there first, not last. But that is the way.

By that time, everyone is all dancing at it. They danced, and the light wiggled back to them, just like that. They wanted me to dance, too, but I thought oh no, not me, my movement will offend it; I am not the boss of my arms and legs.

I stayed back and watched. Then I see how they all look kind of stupid, anyway.

Paolo danced for shit, considering he had the most normal body.

Veda was doing what looked to me like classical Hindi dance. Chu Hwa tried to copy her. The light entity copied them and their giggling ways.

Ammon spun on his back like a top, until he spun off like a top into a potted orange tree. The light copied him, too.

I tried to dance, but my arms and legs got away from me, and I wished the light wouldn't look at me. No use. There I am, and my spaziness, mirrored in light.

Paolo shouted out, "Look, Tiyo's dancing!"

Paolo is very well-meaning, but sometimes, if I had any strength, I would want to hit him. But I wouldn't have hit him that time, anyway, because I looked at the light then and I understood that it loves me.

It showed all five of us, dancing, moving. We didn't want it to end. I kept going, even though I hurt. It never got tired. Looking back, it seems crazy. To this day, there is gossip around the world about how it was probably something made up by Moonbeam Enterprises. I am never believing that.

We stayed there through our sleeping period, and by the time that time was past, Chu Hwa had taught it sign language. Well, maybe not exactly. It copied, but it didn't answer with something new. So we don't know if it understood us. It did love us though, and anyone who says otherwise just doesn't know.

I remember those few days and how happy I was. For those few days, I am thinking Moon House is my true home.

FAQ

Q: If Moonbeam Enterprises had built Moon House themselves, rather than purchasing it secondhand, would the contestants have enjoyed greater physical security?

A: That's the stupidest question anyone has ever asked. Hey, the Russians bought their new lunar habitat on eBay, too! Moon House was built by the Swiss, some of the most security-conscious people in the world. There were no security problems with Moon House.

Q: It has been said that the arrival of the light entity marked a change in the power dynamic between the

contestants and Moonbeam Enterprises. True?

A: We don't frame our success in terms of power, only in providing entertainment, and in helping people. Of course the contestants had power. They were our stars. We were not their enemy. We did everything we could to aid and protect them.

Q: When the light entity left the first time, the ratings dropped. At that point, the relationships between the contestants deteriorated for a while. What psychological support did the company provide during that time?

A: Offering "psychological support" wasn't the company's place. It was supposed to be a contest of psychological strength, among other things. They were to be graded on that as well as work ethic, co-operation, courage, and that elusive quality we call charisma.

Let's just say things got a little crazy. The contestants were blaming us, blaming each other, and speculating all over again that the light feature was some sort of bogus special effect cooked up by us. Ironically, the ratings picked back up then. People love to watch other people fret and bicker.

Paolo's Statement (continued)

Pretty early on, I saw that no one was going to be able to explain the light entity to me, and that was fine. If they couldn't explain it either, then maybe I wasn't so stupid. I got into seeing the light entity like Tiyo and the others. We watched it come and go over the next five days.

There wasn't a particular schedule to it. It was like a wild animal that comes into the backyard to forage for food. It comes for a few days, a few weeks, maybe looking for water in the summer when it's hot, and then it's gone. No one knows what makes it decide to move on.

But I was surprised on day six, almost halfway through the lunar night, when I noticed it hadn't been there for many hours. It wasn't there on days seven or eight, either. Once again, some of us thought it was a company hoax. We argued about it. We blamed each other for believing in the light. We kept doing our assigned jobs, because we were afraid of what would happen if we didn't, but we didn't go much out of our way to put on a show, not even Veda.

Then, on day nine, I was all alone in the media room. I started going there, because the greenhouse was too depressing without the light entity. The media room was the complete opposite of the greenhouse. No windows, everything grey and deep red, with soft seats to sit in. I thought maybe I'd find one of Veda's old movies and look at that, but instead I started watching an English language broadcast out of Shanghai. They said that a Chinese scientific outpost just 15 kilometres to the south of us had spotted the column of light. They started showing pictures of it, of the light as it posed with each of the geologists there. I paged everyone; I screamed for them to come. Chu Hwa arrived first, just a few moments before the segment ended. Tiyo came in, and then Veda and Ammon. Ammon had a smug smile on his face. Veda had been spending a lot of time with him the last few days. She had been with Tiyo and with me from time to time, but Ammon was her favourite. It made no sense; he

treated her badly and said terrible things about women in general and her in particular. But I was used to nothing making sense.

By the time the last three made it to the media room, the news bit was all over. Ammon and Tiyo thought I had things wrong, and turned their anger toward me.

Chu Hwa shushed them, picked up the remote, and scanned the channels. We had about a hundred news channels in various languages. Nothing. "There was something when I first came in. He's not making it up," she said.

"Try the backtrack feature," Tiyo suggested.

The backtrack channel allows you to go back up to 15 minutes to catch something you missed. But when we went back to the Shanghai channel, we couldn't get it to come in clearly. There was interference, even on the backtracked portion. Tiyo said that didn't make sense, unless the recording software was screwed up. Which it wasn't, when he checked it.

I didn't try to figure it out. I was pretty sure Moonbeam Enterprises didn't want us to see it, and that didn't surprise me.

FAQ

Q: Was there a conspiracy to keep the news of the light's reappearance at the Shanghai station from the contestants?

A: Don't be silly. It was a simple glitch. Happens all the time.

Q: But there is evidence that you would rather they had not had further contact with the light. Is that correct?

A: Don't subsequent events support that preference? We didn't know then and we still don't know what we were dealing with. At that point, we only observed the psychological effect this thing had on the contestants.

Q: Some would say the psychological effect was that the light made the contestants happy and gave them a feeling of purpose.

A: It's very sad to me to think that it took an anomalous light feature to make them happy. We gave them everything; a state of the art, Swiss-built Moon House, with better living conditions than any of them (with the exception of Veda) had ever experienced. They had good food, an exercise room, an entertainment centre that anyone would envy, and a gorgeous view of the Earth out every window. We did all that, because we valued them as individuals, and because we believed in them.

Chu Hwa's Statement (continued)

I have said, "Freaks get alien, freaks lose alien, freaks get alien back." That was the story of *Give Them the Moon*.

Paolo spotted it again on the 13th day of our night, only 24 hours before the return of the sun. We all hurried to the greenhouse. The light held us in its eye; there was nothing for us to do, but dance.

Tiyo hated dancing more than any of us, but he loved the light, and so he danced.

I ignored my age and the numbness in my feet and attempted a series of thoughtful poses. Ammon did his

moves, the same stupid spinning moves over and over again. Paolo shuffled his feet and did his best, but dancing is something he was never taught.

Veda, of course, swayed and danced as though the light were the most beautiful music ever played. Then the light suddenly ignored the rest of us to dance with her, first imitating her, then dancing in accompaniment to her. For the very first time, it was responding, not copying.

The light came closer. All of us but Veda backed away. I reached out to pull her back, but the light shone through the glasstic and into her.

We all shielded our eyes, but Veda turned slowly, smiled, and opened her eyes.

Veda couldn't see, and Veda couldn't hear. Yet she saw and she heard. Never mind what she saw and heard; no one can know now.

She made sounds no one could understand. Her fingers moved; I grabbed her hand and signed into it, asking her to tell us what was happening. She tried to talk, and she tried to sign back, but I got only fragments. Spasms seized her and she collapsed, but her fingers danced once more, with three words: *dancing bear* and *sorry*.

The light fled from Veda, and so did Veda herself.

The next half-hour was confused. I remember Tiyo shouting orders at Paolo to pick her up and get her into our sickbay, and I remember Ammon screaming at me as though it were all my fault.

Only after we had tried and failed to revive Veda, and after a frantic and angry exchange with the producers, did I have a chance to think about what Veda had signed to me.

It was a reference to the next-to-last movie she did, the one called *Circus Karma*. That one had a man in it with a small, trained bear. Veda had told me something about it. This actor-bear was an odd sort of animal. He was perfectly tame and well-trained, so perfect that he was probably genetically modified. The bear loved his trainer, and used to run up to him whenever he'd see him. He loved Veda, too. She used to cuddle him like he was a toy. She was still very young then, still at the age when girls love animals more than boys. One day, the bear was so glad to see his trainer that he bounded over, stood on his hind legs, put his front paws on the man's shoulders and knocked him down. The owner's head smashed against the concrete floor, he fractured his skull, and he died a few days later. The bear wasn't being mean; he just didn't know his own strength. I believe that is what Veda was trying to tell me about the light entity, that it was something that just didn't know its own strength.

Veda never said what they did about the bear. But I imagine they shot him.

FAQ

Q: Who made the decision to end the series right then and there?

A: Well, the Chairman of the Board gave the order, but really, there was no discussion. It was the only thing we could do under the circumstances.

Q: Was the exact cause of Veda's death ever determined?

A: No autopsy was performed; her family forbade it. Her

remains were cremated, according to her tradition.

Q: Who decided to go ahead with the voting?

A: Look, we had the funds budgeted; we had to make an award. And when the votes came in, we saw that Veda had won handily. The rest of the votes were divided between the three men, in a sort of sympathy showing, as each of them had had sex with Veda at one time or another.

Chu Hwa received the fewest votes of anyone. Although she had been Veda's main help and aid, viewers never liked her. Those masks she wore had the effect of distancing her from the fans of the show. The viewers never felt they could trust her.

The prize therefore went to Veda's heirs.

Q: It has been widely reported that the other four received large monetary settlements, conditional on their willingness to keep quiet about their experiences on the lunar surface.

A: Monetary bonuses were given; however, there were no conditions attached. These were humanitarian gifts.

Q: But you would have liked them to keep quiet.

A: We did not see what purpose would be served by a public rehashing of the events.

Q: What the four survivors have said since the series ended is quite consistent. They all seem to have had the same experience. It would seem more a synthesizing of information rather than a "rehashing," as you put it.

A: It is a documented fact that people in a survivor situation do tend to bond, even to the point of inventing a mutually agreed upon mythology of the experience.

Q: Looking back on the series with the benefit of hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently, any decisions you would like to take back?

A: No, not really. I can't think of anything at all.

Paolo's Statement (continued)

After Veda's death, they left the cameras rolling, but ended the contest. In two days, the pick-up vehicle arrived from Earth orbit. The sun had just risen twelve hours earlier.

By then, we knew that Veda had won, and the money was given to her designated heirs.

I haven't seen or heard from any of the other three since we landed back on Earth, although I understand they're submitting statements, too. I doubt we'll be holding any reunions.

I miss my garden on the moon and I miss the light. And yes, sometimes I wonder why things had to turn out the way they did.

When you have a brain like mine, it's hard to figure out cause and effect, and it's hard to come to a conclusion about anything. I know cause and effect are still there, but I have trouble following it sometimes. Like the plot of one of Veda's movies. It may make sense on some level, but what is given to you in the script is full of holes and contradictions, so you can't tell. The only way to enjoy the movie is scene by scene, for the colour, the movement, and the music. That's how I take life.

As for conclusions, I don't think anybody wants them

any more. If Moonbeam Enterprises came to any conclusions, it might mean that someone, somewhere in the company was responsible for something they decided. If our viewers liked conclusions, they wouldn't waste their time on reality-based soap opera. If the ISA were to come to some conclusions about this incident, they'd be stuck with the fact that we just had first contact with alien intelligence, and now it's gone, and nobody seems to care.

So no conclusions. We'll never know what the light was, we'll never know what Veda saw, and we'll never know what Moonbeam Enterprises is afraid of.

I wonder what happened to the light. I can imagine it, and I suppose it has shone itself to some other world. Maybe it knows what it did to Veda, and maybe it's sorry, like Chu Hwa says. Maybe it's spending its long life in remorse for its own great strength, as Chu Hwa thought. Maybe it will be more careful next time, and then all of us can enjoy it and wonder at it.

Martha A. Hood's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Learning the Language" (issue 42), "Dust to Dust to..." (issue 52), "The Scratchings on the Wall" (issue 179) and "Just a Number" (issue 186). She lives in Irvine, California, and her stories have also appeared in *Pulphouse*, *Tales of the Unanticipated* and other magazines. Her collection *Inside a Bear and Other Dark Places*, containing 20 tales, appeared from Stone Dragon Press in 1999.

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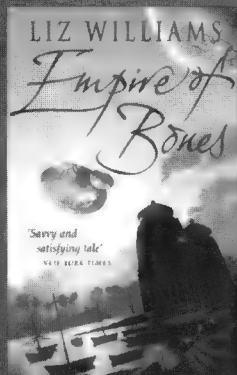
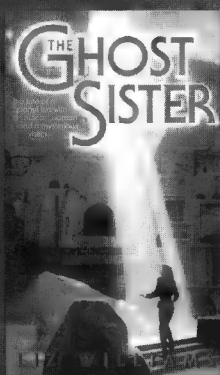
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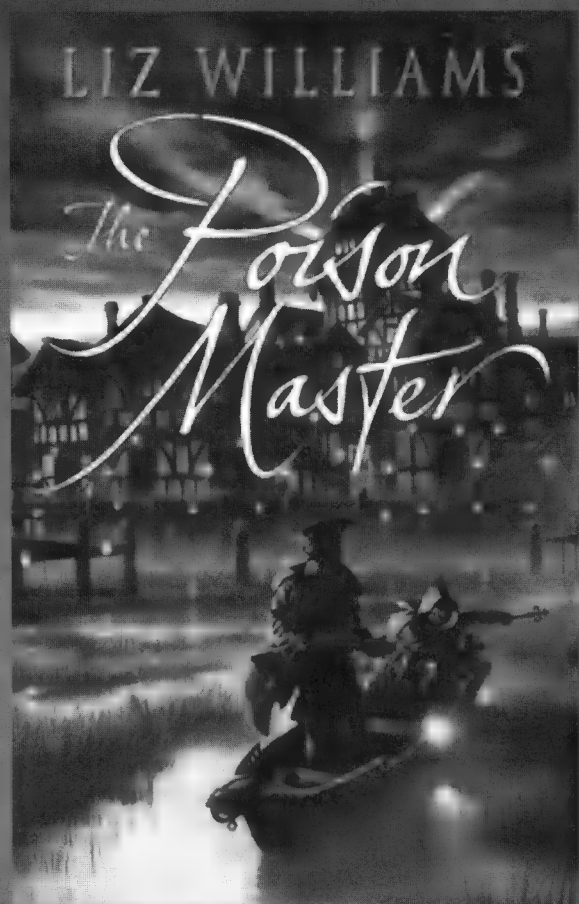
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ANSIBLE LINK-1



DAVID LANGFORD

At another traditionally wine-sodden gathering in the Science Museum on 17 May, the Arthur C. Clarke Award went to Christopher Priest for *The Separation*. The Clarkean numerology that began with a £2001 prize in 2001 led by iron logic to this year's figure of £2003. Chris was much moved and mentioned a key influence of long ago, Sir Arf's *The City and the Stars*: "That book changed my life." *The Separation* had been miserably marketed by Simon & Schuster UK and was hard to find in bookshops: now it's been acquired by Gollancz in an unusual takeover move, with a first hardback edition scheduled for November. • Our wonderful British press rarely takes interest in sf honours, but *The Spectator* gossip column (17 May) called the Clarke "the Booker Prize of the science-fiction world" as preliminary to pouncing on the fact that *The Separation* is dedicated to ACCA administrator Paul Kincaid. Deflatingly for scandalmongers, it is not dedicated to the five judges who actually chose the winner.

THE LIBERATION OF EARTH

J.G. Ballard cannot be doing with *Finnegans Wake*: "Joyce's incomprehensible novel, which has provided a living for generations of English Literature professors, represents a lamentable tendency in 20th Century fiction: the quest for total obscurity. *Finnegans Wake* is the best example of modernism disappearing up its own fundament." (*Independent*)

Robert Holdstock brags: "The Czech Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror have just awarded me their prize for the best novel of 2002 (*The Iron Grail*). The award is called 'The Newt.' Named for Karel Čapek's *War Against the Newts*. The award is... a newt. But hopefully a pewter newt! I'm very pleased indeed."

Jane Johnson of Voyager finds editorial work pretty numinous, according to her *Bookseller* interview: "Words such as 'profound' and 'awe-inspiring' drop readily from her lips as she talks of authors such as David Eddings, Raymond E. Feist and David Zindell."

Alan Moore is changing careers again: "What I'm trying to do at the moment is finish off all of the mainstream comics work around the end of this year, at which point having retired effectively from mainstream comics, I want to play around with things I've been neglecting." These include artwork, sculpture, and "becoming a full-time magician." (*Ninth Art*, April 2003)

Justina Robson, already twice nominated for the Clarke Award, provides future gossip-bait for *The Spectator* in her third novel *Natural History* – featuring a vast, lumbering, obsolete and not very bright terraforming engine, called Kincaid.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Thog Conquers the World. Wearying of best-novel polls, *The Independent* invited pundits to select the worst. The "winner": *The Lord of the Rings*. Sir John Mortimer loathes "Anything about Gandalf, and those little things with hair between their toes. I hate that sort of portentous, phoney, medieval-magical way of writing." Alain de Botton feels actively threatened by Tolkien: "It's strange, weird and frightening, and makes me feel like I'm on the sidelines of a joke I don't understand." Poor dear. Other excoriated fantasies included the Harry Potter saga, *The Tempest*, and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*.

Sidewise Awards. Novels shortlisted for this alternate-history award: Gary L. Blackwood, *The Year of the Hangman*; Martin J. Gidron, *The Severed Wing*; Christopher Priest, *The Separation*; S. M. Stirling, *The Peshawar Lancers*; Harry Turtledove, *Ruled Britannia*.

As Others See Us. Faint praise for the Wachowski brothers (of *Matrix* fame) in *Salon*, which credits "the media-shy siblings" with "a level of fanaticism and devotion to storytelling that is more usually associated with science fiction fans than Hollywood producers." • SF authors may be storytellers, but don't count as novelists: "Contemporary novelists rarely write about science or technology. Margaret Atwood tackles both – and more – in one of the year's most surprising novels." (*The Economist*, 3-9 May)

R.I.P. William C. Anderson (1920-2003), former USAF pilot and author of 20-

odd novels, including the sf comedies *Penelope* (1963) and *Adam M-1* (1964), died on 16 May; he was 83. • *Dave Mooring* (1961-2003), popular UK fan and artist who won the Nova Award for fanzine art four times (1989 to 1993), died on 21 May from pancreatic cancer. He was only 42. • *Robert Stack* (1919-2003), US film actor best known for the TV *The Untouchables*, died on 14 May. He was 84. His sf roles were rare: he was a character voice in the dire animation *Transformers: The Movie* (1986) and also in *Butt-Ugly Martians* (TV, 2001). Terrifyingly, his real name was Robert Langford Modini. • *Roy Tackett* (1925-2003), old-time US fan who rejoiced in the nickname "Horrible Old Roy Tackett," died on 23 May. He produced more than 100 issues of his fanzine *Dynatron* since 1960. Even when half paralysed by a stroke and living in care, "Roy-Tac" sent much farewell e-mail (typed one-handed on a laptop) from what proved to be his deathbed.

Science Corner. "Mars is awash with radiation. That's why it's red." (Brian Blessed, Channel 4, 15 May)

In Typo Veritas. To the delight of Pratchett-lovers, *The Wee Free Men* (US hardback) brags on the back cover that its predecessor was: "A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age 2002."

Mythopoeic Awards fiction shortlists... ADULT Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman, *The Fall of the Kings*; Nina Kiriki Hoffman, *A Fistful of Sky*; Patricia A. McKillip, *Ombria in Shadow*; Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*. • CHILDREN'S Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*; Vivian Vande Velde, *Heir Apparent*; Nancy Farmer, *The House of the Scorpion*; Michael Chabon, *Summerland*; Holly Black, *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale*.

Lunguage Lesson. On 22 May, BBC TV repeatedly announced that little-known sf film *Johnny Pneumonic*. Stephen Gallagher comments: "I know pronunciation can be tricky but I think the anus is on them to get it right, don't you?"

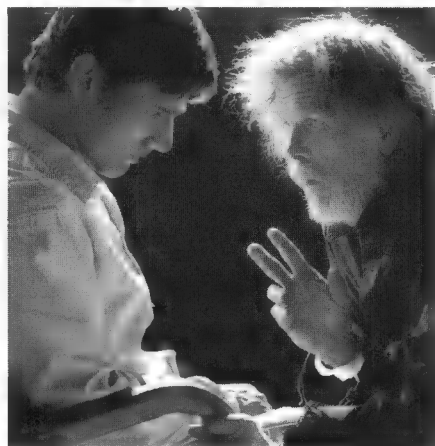
Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of What Does He Call It Now?* "Fate has just laid its freezing hand around that ancient organ he once called his heart, and squeezed it tenderly..." (Jude Fisher, *Sorcery Rising*, 2002) • *Space Drive Dept.* "Reaction rays many times faster than light, pushing back against the cosmic dust of space..." (Edmond Hamilton, *City At World's End*, 1951) • *Dept of Striking Features.* "The headshot was of a fair-haired man with a dazzling smile and dark, piercing eyes above thick, dark eyebrows." (Selma Eichler, *Murder Can Rain on Your Shower*, 2003)

MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

Halfway into the year, and the biggest brand in Hollywood shows no sign of slackening its death grip on the world's burger cartons. None of the Marvel films to date, including the three this year, has been anything less than clever and interesting, but it's strained inspiration to the limit to find something credible to do with the Hulk as a film presence on which to peg it all. Despite a magnificently resonant supergimmick and being an absolute treat to draw, the big green lummoX was always the most limited performer in Stan's stable: a dimwitted, inarticulate character with a silly name (which the film version dares not speak), a

The Hulk: above: "a magnificently resonant supergimmick..."; below: Bruce Banner, played by Eric Bana, listens to his father, David Banner, played by Nick Nolte; right: Jennifer Connelly plays Betty Ross



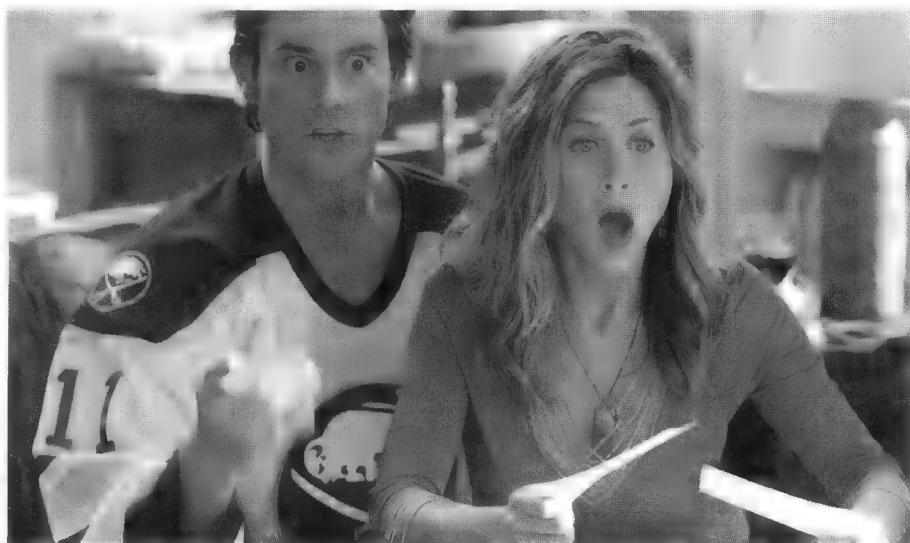
colourless supporting cast, no classic storylines and no interesting nemeses, and the dead weight of an irremediably naff 1970s TV series slung around his neck. The stakes are only raised by the assignment of the movie project to Ang Lee, a control-freak film-maker of Kubrickian obsessiveness and ambition, inexplicably out to prove his summer popcorn credentials as a purveyor of thankless franchised megaproduct – even if it means eliminating the words *Incredible*, then *The*, and finally *Hulk*.

But then like *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four*, and in contrast to the comparatively untroubled production history of the *X-Men* and *Daredevil* films, *Hulk* is the fruit of a rescue mission deep into the heart of development hell. Lee's writer James Schamus cut down a project that had been hanging around for years for random hacks to take periodic swipes at, and the end result is one of those gruesomely malformed Frankenscripts which have visibly been stitched together out of body parts dug up from several different plots. Some of the seams show in the massively overdetermined storylining, with Bruce now getting his powers by a triple whammy of radiation exposure (so 1962), genetic manipulation (so last year), and nanotech (so *du jour*). But the most surreal touch is the use of what were clearly two alternative third acts from separate drafts quite different in logic and tone, which Schamus and Lee have simply hooked up in series to create a strange Jekyll/Hyde

juxtaposition of contrasting endings: one reassuringly normal and well-adjusted, and the second an insane rampaging mutant fuelled by Hollywood rage.

It's no secret that the whole industry has its plot labs locked in a race to engineer a screenplay that will be entirely made of ending; but *Hulk* shows the terrifying consequences for humanity if this quest is allowed to run its course unchecked. Time passes pretty agreeably during the first ending, with ol' green skin bounding around beautifully-shot desertscapes plucking military aircraft out of the sky in a series of improbably nonlethal helicopter crashes ("We're busted up, but we're ok!"), to culminate in a classical clinch finale on a rather dishevelled Telegraph Hill with exquisitely clausal dialogue





from beauty and her beast ("You found me." "You weren't that hard to find." "Yes I was."). But with Schamus's late reinsertion of the discarded David Banner character into the plotline spaghetti, all this becomes mere limber-up for a bigger, madder ending in which Bruce works out his bottled-up Oedipal anger on the psycho dad whose radical parenting techniques have messed up his genes and his head. ("I should have killed you," they greet one another.) Because of the old law of comics that only superpower combat has the power to resolve personal issues, this requires dad to be put through the random supervillain powers machine, emerging in time for this year's best exchange with a doomed security guard: "I can partake with [*sic*] the essences of all things!" – "I'm going to have to ask you to put your hands up, pal."

The result is a film whose long exposure to the Hollywood nanobots has completely rewired its mythic circuitry. All the Marvel films have been careful to try and respect their originals' resonance as hormonal parables addressing the issues that beset the comics fan at the pubertal cusp of his purchasing commitment: alienation, self-esteem, identity, body change, sexual unsuccess, and in *Hulk's* case savage mood swings. It starts well, with fine first-act work on the Bruce/Betty relationship as a paradigm of comics fans' sex lives, with Bruce lamenting his romantic inarticulacy ("If I could be more... whatever") to every fan's dream girlfriend ("It's just a byproduct of my obsession with emotionally distant men"). And she knows the words all teenage males need to hear: "I guess there's more to you than you like to show," says Betty wistfully. "There certainly couldn't be any less." But the longer the project spends in development jail, the more the Hollywood needles get passed around, spreading their dirty little viral nanomyths: that everything is

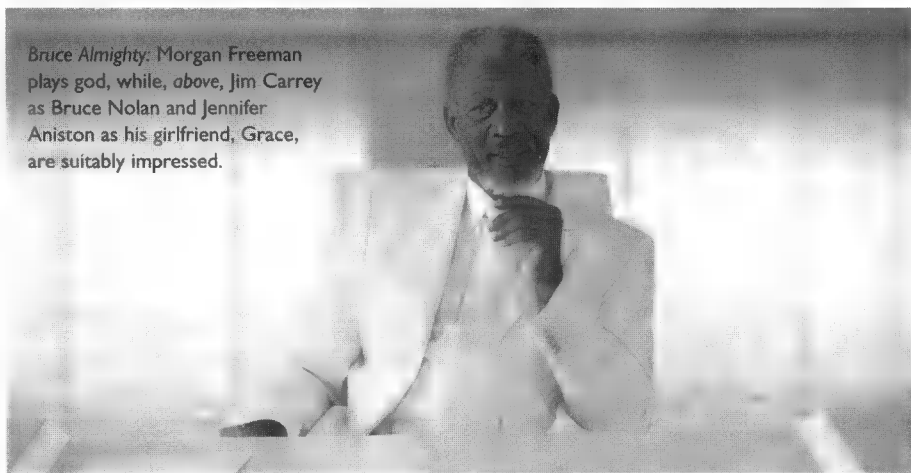
about fathers and sons, that emotional restraint is deadly thought crime, that it's a zero-sum world of winners and losers and you can't even think about losing. "There's some kind of greatness in you," Bruce is assured by his mom, "and someday you're going to share it with the whole world." Just what every kid needs to be told, you might think, to wind him up for the rage of disappointment that is every American's birthright. But no, this boy's inner demons are fuelled instead by paternal abuse, and like everyone who commands real power in Hollywood's world (overpaid, self-obsessed actors in overpriced, narcissistic therapy) he resolves it by drawing on those demons to turn him into a star.

As a display of entertainment technique, there's still plenty to admire. True, the virtual Hulk isn't up to much, and Nick Nolte turns in the most shambling overperformance of his career (and this from a man who could shamble for Yuggoth). But the overall staging is often quite beautiful, and though you wouldn't immediately think of Natacha Atlas as the natural accompaniment to the Hulk smashing tanks together, Danny Elfman's Arabic-tinted score is the best he's ever done. Optimistic claims have been

made for Lee's flashy use of moving split-screen images, in a kind of dynamic simulation of a comics page, as a "new visual language", though it's really just a big-screen development of things that have been happening in television and games for some years. Nevertheless, Lee has clearly thought about ways in which the narrative density of the film image can be enhanced for an ever more impatient and sophisticated consumer, and the bravura credit sequence, intercutting glimpses of David Banner's experiments with flashes of his notebooks in which key phrases are PICKED OUT IN BLOCK CAPITALS, is a dazzling exercise in speed exposition. Throw in exploding frogs, mutant French poodles (refreshingly exempt from AHA monitoring), and Sam Elliott on fantastic scene-burgling form, and it's hard to get dangerously angry with the result.

Whatever its problems with expressing itself, *Hulk* is at least an old-fashioned secular film, true to its material's 1960s roots, that resists the tide of metaphysical fundamentalism in Bush-era Hollywood. Not so with the interesting, scary *Bruce Almighty*, which turns the blinding light of non-denominational (though nevertheless scrupulously Judaeo-Christian) Hollywood theology on the dark spaces in the American dream. Jim Carrey's Bruce looks at first like everyone's dream of success: he's famous, he's on TV every day, he's even coupling with Jennifer Aniston. But Bruce's problem is that, though quite adequately narcissistic, career-obsessed, and indifferent to the needs of those around him, he's still not quite unpleasant enough to survive in the dog-slay-dog world of ruthlessly competitive aspiration. "I'm pushing 40," he laments, "and there's an anti-Bruce barrier." What's *wrong* with the universe? Well, the great thing about the combination of whingeing middle-American blame culture with born-again fundamentalism is that if there's something wrong with the uni-

Bruce Almighty: Morgan Freeman plays god, while, above, Jim Carrey as Bruce Nolan and Jennifer Aniston as his girlfriend, Grace, are suitably impressed.



verse you at least know who to sue. "God is ignoring me," he complains to Aniston. "He could fix my life in five minutes if he wanted to." And when Bruce is released to the employment market, "You're the one who should be fired," he rants to his maker. "The only one around here not doing his job is You." Why shouldn't God be subject to performance indicators like everyone else? As Morgan Freeman's transcendently avuncular deity points out at the end of their job-swap, "Not as easy as it looks, son, this God business." But it's still a business, and business models apply. A personal God should as a minimum take your calls; otherwise, you're right to demand his job, so long as you're prepared for the pressures of overpromotion.

For a formula comedy, *Bruce Almighty* is quite a brave attempt to face frankly up to the fact that most of the cinema audience prays, and to use this fact to explore the tensions in the way Americans think of their deity. Bruce's is a very personal God who answers prayer like – in fact, as we see, *exactly* like – any other successful manager deals with e-mail, and the film's reassurance to believers and managers alike is that God, like any successful manager, does an impossible job pretty well. It's a film that isn't afraid of introducing to the dialogue sinister incantations from specialist channels to which Hollywood hasn't traditionally tuned, and which sound pretty chilling to the unaccustomed ear ("Lord, I need a miracle. I'm desperate. Reach into my life."). If it's ultimately no more successful than *Hulk* at reconciling the contradictions in its audience's dreams, it's because again it's too Hollywood-inbred to think of solutions that don't involve being an actor; for the irony is that the prime mover and supreme being in this film is not the one playing God, but the almighty Bruce. This is a star's film, developed by Carrey as his own personal career salvation, and not above showing off its maker's omnipotence by crushing Hollywood's certified most powerful actress into a thankless, colourless supporting role.

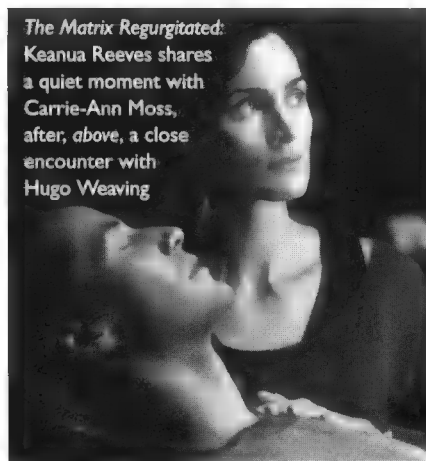
And as Bruce is at pains to remind us, you need to be good to be God. It opens with a skilful, disarming sketch under the credits which demonstrates with some force that Jim Carrey is an astonishingly gifted, subtle, charismatic performer when he's not required to throw his limbs around and gurn loonily. Unfortunately, no sooner have the credits stopped than he's off, doing what he thinks we want. See Jim use his hilarious physical comedy-skills to enliven the everyday actions of waking up, getting out of his car, housetraining his dog, and stepping into a very deep puddle! See Jim



use his godlike powers of impression comedy to do Clint, Walter Cronkite, and someone you don't quite recognize! Not that he's happy about it; there's a lot about the trappedness of the successful comedian's aspirations, the resentment of the talented creative pigeonholed into being professionally wacky. "I have to act like a total goof to make it work," he laments. Aniston tries to reassure him: "There's nothing wrong with being funny," and God agrees: "You have the divine spark. You have the gift of bringing joy and laughter to the world." Less good news for the rest of us, who aren't blessed with Jim's and Bruce's celestial talents: "Don't underestimate the value of manual labour," advises the Almighty. But equally, says the rest of the film, don't estimate it so highly that you permit yourself to contemplate a career actually doing it. At the end of the movie, Bruce has hung up his floor mop and is back in his high-paying, high-profile screen job, warming hearts and inspiring adoration in all who are touched by his glory. It's a wonderful life if you can get it.

Bruce Almighty marks a surprisingly successful conservative fight-back by the old Hollywood testament against the most successful metaphysical gospel of the last days – putting an end after only a week at the box-office

The Matrix Regurgitated:
Keanu Reeves shares
a quiet moment with
Carrie-Ann Moss,
after, above, a close
encounter with
Hugo Weaving



to what had been hubristically proclaimed the Year of the Matrix. The film itself, *The Matrix Reloaded*, has some cinematically exciting sequences and a much more overtly comicsy kind of plot logic than its leaner, more Phil-Dickian predecessor: full of authentically ponderous exposition, densely portentous dialogue, and a cast of strange pseudo-characters with titles rather than names – to an extent that feels quite subversive, if not all that satisfying, as a way of doing cinema. But it seems to have been plotted without the faintest notion of why the first film resonated with its target audience, and the endless onanistic metadiscussion of plotting wears very thin even without the usual terrible dialogue and a veritable gallery of traditional kiss-of-death sequences, including a grubby tribal resistance village and a council chamber scene with officials with funny stuff on their heads. You also learn the reason nobody's previously tried to mount a stunt fight inside a car. *Revolutions* can hardly fail to be an improvement, but as it stands this is strictly *Two Towers* stuff.

More impressive than *Reloaded* itself were the *Animatrix* cycle of shorts that formed part of the cross-media rollout: a mixed bag, with consistently gobsmacking animation and mostly rather dud storylines, but including one terrifyingly deranged instalment (the *Kid* backstory, one of the episodes storylined by the Wachos themselves) that unabashedly yells "Do it! Do it!" to any alienated teen open to the suggestion that their school and parents are a part of a massive conspiracy of control and if they do the Vanilla Sky jump off a building they'll wake up in a way cool real world and get to join Keanu's army. In a perfectly literal sense, it's pop cinema at its most dangerous – offering a radical new version of the American dream for suggestible teens in search of permanent escape. Good luck with the lawsuits, bros!

To see the flagship *Animatrix* film *Final Flight of the Osiris* in cinemas, you had to experience Lawrence Kasdan's bizarre *Dreamcatcher*: a bold but quite mad attempt to make a plausible film from Stephen King's 2001 novel of male friendship, physical and mental disability, and exploding telepathic bowel monsters from outer space. Written in longhand during King's recovery from the car impact that nearly killed him (and which becomes the pivotal event in its hero's story), the book is a slightly overweight, more than usually ludicrous blend of upstate sentimental realism with in-your-face-and-down-your-throat body horror that chortles "Film

this, suckers" at anyone rash enough to think it. Nevertheless, William Goldman had a go at the script before Kasdan took over – evidently attracted to the novel's strongest feature, the decades-spanning relationship between the four male leads and the severely Downsian boy "Duddits" who paradoxically becomes the centre of their circle. But both writers have been stumped by the challenge of modulating the violent genre and tonal conflicts between the *Stand By Me* flashback plot, the *Big Chill/Grand Canyon* reunion of the characters' adult selves in a snowbound hunting lodge in upstate Maine, and what the novel's heroes (B-movie fans all) wryly term Attack of the Killer Shit-Weasels. For this is *Independence Day* meets *Alien* in a septic tank: a tale in which dentated vaginas from outer space roam around biting chaps' knobs off, sodomizing them up the toilet, and infecting them parasitically with airborne horror-movie metaphor disease by exploding into fungal spore-clouds, while a now very unGodly Col. Morgan Freeman's disease-control militia go gung-ho rogue in pursuit.

King's 600 pages of bug-eyed plotting have been fairly faithfully tracked, allowing for some necessary adjustment to the flashback structure and some frantic condensation of the mechanics. But Kasdan's adaptive



Dreamcatcher: (left to right) Damian Lewis, Thomas Jane, Timothy Olyphant and Jason Lee

skills have been wholly defeated by the finale, which in the novel takes place in a telepathic virtual space as the climax to a plotline set in a Simonidean art-of-memory palace, here indigenized and downhomed as Jonesy's "memory warehouse." The mnemotechnic warehouse remains, rather finely realized; but Kasdan bottles fatally out before its purpose is fulfilled, and restages the ending as an old-fashioned physical duke-out with creature FX, in which the nature of the Duddits character is suddenly, desperately, and nonsensi-

cally reconceived. It's all a wonderful genre folly, with many fine scenes, but also some amazingly bad reaction shots, overdrawn suspense sequences, and "they look at one another slowly" scenes. Tone and pacing are all over the place, in a joyful celebration of all that's silly and beguiling in genre cinema, without a trace of the ponderous heroic psychomyths or big-movie franchise-friendliness that everything else is mired in. For that alone, a mighty Marvel no-prize.

Nick Lowe

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ART BY DAVID HO

Cuckoo

Chris Butler

He stood at the foot of the bed, curled his hands into fists, uncurled them. "What can I do?" he muttered impotently. Dark indigo shades had gathered in the room. He wanted it to be morning again, for new life and new light to flood into the house.

He heard Welf come in from the porch; noticed that she did not hurry as she made her way through the house to join him at his daughter's bedside. He knew that she saw his distress, recognized this human emotion, and wanted to comfort him. She came close to him and tilted her head, dipping into his line of sight. "She will survive," the native said. For a moment, it seemed he had not heard her. "Peter?"

"You don't know that," he said bitterly. "Where's the bloody doctor?"

She moved up to the head of the bed and rested her scaly hand upon the human child's forehead. The fever was severe. "She is at war with her self."

His bitterness turned to contempt. "Is that the way you see it?" he asked harshly. He glared at her, demanding an answer.

She stepped back, perplexed by the ferocity in him. "The child fights herself. In the end she will surrender, and all will be well."

"Get out of here. Now."

She left as quietly as she entered.

Outside, the night surrounded her, unnaturally still. Only one of the three moons was visible in the sky, there was no sound and no wind to bring the night's fragrance. She did not want this sensory depravation. She reached further out, studied the constellations, located the visitors' star about which their home planet ploughed its orbital furrow. They are strange, she thought – they work such miracles, but know so little.

Twenty years earlier, 300 came to this world. Their ship flashed back into normal space, and glistened there in starlight. Twin blue flames flared as the engines ignited

to begin their descent. They fell into the atmosphere where cloud vapour bathed the hull and all that the pilot could see was the warning lights that blazed across the instrument panels. He struggled on, desperately searching for a suitable landing site as systems failed one after another in a terrifying cascade.

They survived. Peter Trent remembers that terrifying and exhilarating moment when he and his wife Alice took their first step together onto the alien soil. Breathing in the air, smelling the strange sweet musk, hearing the chatter of the birds in the trees.

He was 30 years old, not counting the centuries in hibernation, six feet tall and muscular. "Can I grow a beard?" he asked her.

"No," she said firmly. Alice was slender, five foot three, a little younger than her husband. She had felt unsteady since coming out of the hibernation, as if something had been lost. He told her that the sense of unease would pass – the beauty of this new world, which promised so much, would surely strengthen her.

They arrived on a cool spring day, but were warmly and ceremonially greeted. They had been preceded by another ship five years earlier, a small crew specially trained to carry out the difficult first-contact negotiations. So the new contingent was able to settle straight in and make itself at home. In the native language, the name for the world was pronounced "Path" and the colonists readily adopted this name for their new home.

The appearance of a pathian was, superficially, not unlike that of a human; two arms, two legs, head, torso. But still you would never mistake one for the other. They had faces with eyes like horizontal bars of blackness, a sharp nose and a small mouth. Expressive but inhuman. They had a scaly skin, more like that of a reptile than a fish. A soft fur covered the body, short except at the back of the neck where it grew longer to dress the shoulders.

The 300 all listened attentively as cultural differences were discussed through a series of lectures given by the advance team. They watched projected images of the

natives at work in the fields, or at rest in their homes. Alice watched the children playing. "Well, at least there seems to be some common ground," she whispered to her husband.

He frowned. "Some," he said tentatively.

His concentration wavered only a moment, and then he focused again on the presentation. Still, Alice seemed determined to distract him. "You're a fine man," she said, "I think our children will be very handsome."

From their second day they began surveying the area to find a suitable place for a farm. The agreement reached with the pathians required that the humans spread out over a large area rather than set up a small village. For some reason they regarded this as being more harmonious.

The Trents chose a plot of land next to a river. Peter remembers as if it were yesterday: the water flowing quickly that day, the shape of the land, the wan colour of the trees. He picked up a handful of soil and let it fall between his fingers.

"We're going to be happy here," he said. A hint of relief could be detected in his voice, but mostly there was a sense of triumph. They had made it to the new world!

A fish of some kind splashed in the river, as if the planet had winked at them. "We can raise a family here," he said. He picked up an axe and headed towards the forest. "It's going to be so good."

He snagged his foot on a vine and fell flat on his face. She smiled, which made him laugh, and she helped him back to his feet.

In the first few months, the weather became progressively hotter. Peter and Alice sweltered in the humid air. They managed to lay the foundations for a house but their progress was slow. At night they slept under a tarpaulin stretched between trees, thankful for any slight breeze that might drift through to cool them.

The river level fell and the parched landscape lost much of its colour. But to the south, nestled in a valley, a wooded marshland remained a verdant, thriving home to exotic species of plant and animal life.

On a particularly sultry day, the Trents set out to explore the marshland. For hours they had hunted a Gox, a creature like a wild boar. Roasted on a spit it would feed them well for weeks. They had followed their intended prey for some considerable distance now, glimpsing it occasionally, moving steadily closer. The trees grew tall here and had a thick foliage, but a sullen light filtered through.

A sheen of sweat covered their bodies as they crouched in the hot, stifling air trapped by the tall grass. They held short, wooden spears in each hand as they moved stealthily through the undergrowth, the ground moist underfoot.

They heard a muffled rustling noise somewhere close, became as statues, Peter slightly ahead of Alice. In their first months on Path, their labours had given them a lean, muscled physique. Cautiously, Peter took another step forward, then froze again. A false move now and their quarry might flee, and the entire pursuit would be wasted effort.

They heard a hoof stomping repeatedly into the ground, then silence again. It had been nearby but it was hard to determine the direction. Peter glanced back to Alice. She

shrugged, equally uncertain of the position. He gestured for her to move to the right while he went to the left.

They had moved 20 yards apart when suddenly the Gox came thundering towards Peter Trent – unseen except for the frantic disturbance of the grass, which shifted in a rippling wave that hurtled towards him with alarming velocity. He drew back his arms to prepare to strike with his spears, but his reactions were too slow. The Gox reared up, forcing its blunt head into his chest. Shunted spectacularly through the air, he landed hard on his back, winded, gasping for air.

Alice Trent began running towards her husband. The Gox opened its jaws and bit down on Peter's upper arm. He screamed in agony as the creature's sharp teeth pierced his skin and tore into the muscle. Forcefully it stomped its hooves and backed up, shaking its head, pulling Trent with it, the teeth gouging deeper wounds into his arm.

Alice drove one sharp spear horizontally through the creature's head, and drove the other decisively down vertically through the top of the skull. Its brain skewered by the crossing spears, the Gox was dead without ever realizing what had happened. Its mind gone, the jaws relaxed. She pushed on the spears like wheel spokes and the dead animal toppled away from her.

For a moment, Peter looked up at her blankly, stunned. Then a furious mix of emotions swept over him – anger and relief chief among them. Alice dropped to her knees and kissed him. After a moment, the pain in his arm reasserted itself, and he grimaced while Alice inspected the wound.

They knew of a natural hot spring, about a mile back the way they had come, where they could bathe the wound. Alice built a makeshift sled and between them they managed to drag the Gox carcass back that far, despite Peter having to nurse his injured arm. They made camp and finally, when they knew they had a safe place to rest for the night, Peter waded into the warm water. He was relieved to discover that the wound wasn't as bad as they had first thought. If they could keep it clean until they were able to get to the ship's doctor, Tanner, then everything would be fine.

He listened to the night sounds – mysterious noises like the croaking of frogs and the beating of wings. With his good arm, he slapped angrily at the water. He had been careless, underestimated the Gox. He couldn't afford such mistakes, he knew. Then he heard a sound behind him and turned quickly, but it was just Alice stepping into the water to join him. In the moons' light, her bare skin took on an exotic grey-blue hue. His anger vanished, replaced by other emotions.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'll live."

Her arms reached round him at his waist. She rested her face against his chest and stayed there for a long moment, holding him close. Eventually she said, "Was it madness to come here?"

He leaned back a fraction, and she tilted her head up to meet his gaze.

"Did we have a choice?" he said.

"I don't know what I would do here if anything were to happen to you."

"I made a mistake today. I won't make another. We'll be fine."

She pushed him back towards the edge of the pool where the water was not so deep. There she pressed herself against him again, her hips pushed against his, an unmistakably sexual gesture.

"We should get started on a family," she said.

"It's too soon," he protested, "there is so much still to do. We've barely begun with building the house."

"There's no guarantee I will get pregnant right away. It could take months. Probably will."

She reached her arms up, behind his neck, pulling his head forward, inviting him to kiss her.

"But what if you do get pregnant straight away?"

She hooked her legs round him, her knees splashing in the water as they came up, her ankles pressing against the back of his thighs. She said, "Did we come all this way, risk so much, for you to have doubts now?"

"No, no, I'm sorry," he said tenderly. He kissed her on the neck, just under the chin, something she loved. "Of course not."

"Let's not talk any more," she said.

His protests ended then, and soon their cries joined the other sounds rising up in the marshland's hot night air.

Two years passed. They finished building their home. There were crops growing in the fields, and the nearest of these swayed lush and yellow in the gentle breeze. Everything was as idyllic as they had hoped. Except that they had no child.

Peter walked along the banks of the river. Perhaps a mile from his home, a group of pathian women were washing their clothes. They joked amiably with each other to pass the time. He took off his shoes and waded in to join them. "Can I help?" he said.

The women smiled. They had learned to speak a little English, some better than others. A shirt was passed to him, and a bar of soap. He scrubbed the shirt carefully, his hands making small splashes in the water, then passed it back. Welf studied his efforts. "Is good," she said.

Welf showed more interest in the colonists than was typical. She had two children whom Peter and Alice liked very much. They were playful and happy, courteous and respectful.

"Peter!" someone called from the bank.

He looked around and saw that it was John Tanner, the doctor. John had been the senior medic on the ship. He spent his time now flying between the different settlements, running clinics and providing surgeries.

Peter waded back to the shore. John stretched out a hand and pulled him up onto the bank. "What's this? House call?"

Tanner mopped his brow with a handkerchief. The sun, high in the sky, beat down on him with a ferocity that could only be the work of some particularly malicious local deity. "It's about the tests."

Trent studied the doctor a moment. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Tanner tried not to look flustered. "Please, it's best if

I talk to you both together. Let's get out of this sun."

They walked in silence for a while. Then, as much to fill the silence as anything, Peter asked the doctor about his studies into the physiology of the pathians.

"I must confess it's becoming something of a passion," he said. "They're endlessly fascinating. I'm working hard to win their trust. If I can get them to let me in to their lives..."

"I think they're very open already, aren't they?"

"Yes, and no," the doctor said slowly. "They will work with us to learn each other's languages and so on. Very friendly, of course. But it's the big stuff I want to know about. Birth, death, sex..."

"Pervert," Trent said playfully.

"One thing that's surprising is that they have incredible regenerative powers. I've seen an injury where a whole arm got lopped off and it actually grew back."

Peter Trent was suitably amazed. "Hope they don't imagine we can do that," he said.

They arrived back at the Trents' cottage where they found Alice in the garden, painting with home-made watercolours. Back in the house, she heated up some soup in a kettle over the fire. The doctor explained that he had the results from tests they had undertaken, and that they would not be able to have children. At least, it would be impossible for Alice to carry a child to full term.

"Was I damaged in hibernation?" she asked, her voice empty of all emotion.

"Hard to say. Might have happened anyway."

"Is there any possibility?" Peter asked.

The doctor shrugged helplessly. "I have enough apparatus to extract a fertilized egg from the womb. In theory I could then plant the egg in a surrogate mother..."

He didn't have to tell them the "But..."

There were less than 200 human females on the planet, and life on Path was hard. The other colonists were busy building their own lives, struggling to harvest enough crops to eat, having their own children. No one could afford to give up nine months to carry a child for the unfortunate Trents.

A year later, John Tanner came to their house again. "Who is this?" he quizzed the pathian sat in a bamboo-style chair on the front porch.

She tilted her head, squinted because of the sun behind him. "I am Welf," she said.

"Are the Trents at home?"

"Please come in," she said, putting down the multi-coloured quilt she was sewing and leading him through.

Alice Trent looked up and smiled at the doctor. "What a pleasure," she said warmly. "Soup?"

"It seems I can always rely on a nice bowl of hot soup around here. Yes, please. Is Peter around?"

"He's out hunting," Alice said, and she hefted the soup kettle onto a hook over the fire. "Won't be back until after dark."

Welf sat down discreetly in a corner of the room.

"Please tell me he's not hunting Gox again," the doctor said.

She laughed. "Let's hope not."

Tanner talked for a while, gossip from the other settlements, which Alice was happy to listen to. They ate the soup together, dipping large chunks of bread into the broth. Welf declined to join in, but listened. Alice allowed John a taste of a shocking home-made liquor; he gasped in admiration. But this was not the reason he had come.

"Why are you here?" she said eventually.

"I'm not sure I should mention it with your husband not here."

She fixed him with an icy stare across the dining table.

"Oh all right," he relented. "I don't see that this will help you, but who knows. Relations with the pathians are improving each year..."

"What is it? Cut the crap."

Tanner managed a rueful smile. Alice had always preferred him to be direct with her and it was a quality he admired. "I've been continuing my studies into the physiology of the pathians," he said. "They are slowly coming to trust me, and I have been able to perform various scans and such. Blood tests. I've even been allowed to perform autopsies. I can't be sure of course, since it has never been done, but it seems to me that there is no reason why a pathian shouldn't be able to carry a human foetus. I mean, be a surrogate for you."

She stared at him for a long moment. He felt compelled to say something more. "You can understand why I hesitated in telling you this. It means that there are many more potential surrogates, but, you mustn't misunderstand me, it is far from straightforward. I would have to temporarily alter the DNA of the surrogate. And realistically, it is unlikely that we will reach a point soon where there is sufficient understanding, and trust, between ourselves and the pathians."

Alice was crying. "Yes," she said. "Of course."

Welf stood quietly, walked across and sat down at the table with them. "I am happy to do this thing," she said. "There should be a baby."

The pregnancy went well. Welf was able to carry the child with little or no complications. She asked for nothing but the Trents did all they could to support her, particularly in the later stages as Welf grew heavier and tired easily. It was the least they could do, feeling like cuckoo birds who had laid their egg in another bird's nest.

Peter Trent's initial unease at the whole idea had slowly given way. He knew that sometimes compromises had to be made. He had come to this planet bursting with hope and he had been naïve; the realities of their new life had taught him harsh lessons. But he felt proud now. Even in circumstances as difficult as these, so far from their home world, they had found a way to make their every wish come true.

Increasingly, Alice took care of Welf's two children, and came to love them dearly. They were carefree and constantly made her laugh. They mastered human language much more quickly than adult pathians, but this did not mean that they were any easier to comprehend. They were capable of such abstractions of thought, frequently left her floundering as their conversation took some huge lateral leap. An attempt to describe snow to them ended in agree-

ment between the siblings that time is like the forest.

She wondered about their father, but quickly discovered that enquiries on the subject were unwelcome.

The delivery went very badly, almost ending in disaster. The pathian midwives, who had insisted on taking charge of the birth, suddenly appeared to abandon hope. Tanner, in desperation, performed a caesarean section. He had put that baby in there and he was damn well going to get it out again. Given the pathians' astonishing regenerative powers, he had every reason to hope that Welf would survive.

He was right, and Peter and Alice Trent had a baby daughter. They named her "Red," after the Grimm fairy tale in which a little girl is eaten by a wolf, and rescued by cutting the wolf open. An old granny might have made the analogy complete, but there were none on Path. At least, no human ones.

Soon after the birth, Alice set out on a torturous walk/climb up through the forested hills to a bluff peak overlooking the entire valley, carrying Red on her back in a harness. Exhausted, she held the child in her arms and showed her their home; the pathian village, the trail of the river, their farmland, the forests, hills and valley.

On Earth she had undertaken similar climbs, but they had never taken such a toll. She struggled for air, her lungs burned. In her heart she knew that something was wrong, something more than an inability to bear children. She looked into the eyes of her child, and pushed the darkness away. She made her a promise that she would not give up without one hell of a fight. And she kept her promise.

"How old is she now?" Tanner said.

"Red?" said Alice, "Oh, she's nine now."

"Has it really been nine years?"

Alice smiled. "Could you help me to sit up a little?"

The doctor assisted her, helping to pull her up higher in the bed and adjusting the pillows behind her. The strain on her was evident, but she made no complaint.

"She's grown into a lovely little girl," he said.

"Yes. I have been very lucky to have her. Promise me you will keep her well."

"She has no need for my services. She is perfectly healthy. Don't worry about her."

"How can I help it? I am her mother. But yes, you are right. Peter dotes on her. He is such a good father. And Welf has helped so much. Red will hardly notice when I'm gone."

"Nonsense."

"You will, though."

"Me?"

"She's not so good at making soup."

He laughed, stayed a while longer passing on gossip, promised to come back again the following week.

When Peter Trent eventually came home that night, Alice was sleeping. He climbed into the bed beside her and wrapped his arms around her. He loved to hold her. The shallowness of her breathing frightened him. He kissed her on the neck, just under the chin, and thought

perhaps he saw a flicker of a smile.

She died a few days later.

The funeral was attended by Peter, Red, one other human family who lived close enough to have known them, a small contingent of human officials, the doctor, Welf and hundreds of native pathians who, it seemed, had taken the Trent family to their collective heart.

He tried his best to endure it, standing there for the service, while the wind gusted around them. Welf displayed the same calm serenity that she always showed, with Red clinging to her hand the whole time.

The air was filled with blossom blown up the hill from the neighbouring fields. It remained there, dancing with the wind, long after the mourners had taken themselves away.

Within six months, Welf and her two children had taken up residency in Peter Trent's house. They had not so much moved in as simply stopped ever leaving. Peter built an extension to the house so that all three children could have a bedroom each.

No additional room had to be built for Welf. He had never actually invited her into his bed, as such. But she was there beside him all day, so why not at night? He did not, could not, find her physically attractive. So he told himself. But she was selflessly loving towards him, she liked to be held and he like to have someone to hold. Over time the closeness of another body, the caresses, led to arousal and they each learned how to satisfy the other; with hands, with the mouth.

They were happy. The years passed quickly.

Now Red was 17 years old, and suddenly ill. The dawn came, pushing aside the indigo night, and her fever continued to burn. The doctor arrived back at the house shortly after sunrise.

"Where the hell have you been?" Trent howled at him.

"Running tests, what do you think?"

"I didn't think she was going to live through the night. I've been frantic with worry."

Tanner examined his patient. "I can't lie to you. She's desperately ill. I know what's wrong with her. It isn't good."

"I can't lose her as well."

The doctor frowned. "Let's take a walk out by the river, and I'll tell you what's happening."

"I can't leave her."

"Please. You may want to shout at me. That shouldn't be done in here."

They stood at the river's edge in the early morning light. The sun, low on the horizon, cast their shadows out into the water. On the surface, the local insect life skated. The tall grasses that grew in the shallows by the banks stood perfectly still. Nearby, a big old tree that had stood there for centuries towered above them imperiously.

"In a way, we're all responsible," the doctor began. "You, me, Alice and Welf. But the biggest fault is mine."

Peter Trent failed to understand.

"Oh God, where to began? Have you heard of Microchimerism?" the doctor asked him.

"Sorry, no."

"No, no, why would you have? Look, Microchimerism, as it pertains in this instance, is a condition whereby a small number of cells from the parent can survive for many years, decades even, within an infant. Typically the cells are transferred from mother to foetus during pregnancy. Understand... these are the mother's cells, not the child's. They are, therefore, a foreign element in the child's body.

"Now, this is rare, but it does happen. So, a certain percentage of the population carries these foreign cells within them. Of those, the majority tolerate the foreign cells. After all, the DNA is a close match, that of the parent. But others are not so lucky. In some cases, the immune system wakes up one day and takes a dislike to the foreign cells, even though they are a close genetic match and the cells have been present in the body, and tolerated, since before the baby was born. This rejection can happen at any time and if it does it gets ugly. A variety of auto-immune illnesses may follow."

Peter Trent's heart sank. He could see where this was going, and it could only get worse. "This was not a normal pregnancy."

"No, it was not. Although Welf was perfectly able to carry this baby to term for you and Alice, I never stopped to consider that cells from Welf could be left in the child's body. In Red's case, the cells are not simply foreign, they're alien. And she's rejecting those cells."

Peter Trent pushed his hands through his thinning hair, trying to take it all in. "But why now?" he asked.

"Can't say for sure." Tanner shook his head sadly. "Could have been something as simple as a virus that kick-started it. Something that made the body think it was in a fight."

There was a final element of the story still to be told. "I'm afraid I'm not finished yet. The pathians have tremendous regenerative powers, and it would appear that the cells that belong to Welf are none too impressed at being attacked by those belonging to Red."

"Oh hell!"

"They seem to have been galvanized into action. They're multiplying like crazy. There is a war going on inside her, and I'm afraid that Welf's cells are likely to be far more resilient than Red's."

"There is a war going on inside her," Trent repeated the phrase back to the doctor. He repeated it again. Hadn't Welf said something like that? "She is at war with her self!"

Peter Trent turned quickly and headed back to the house. "Welf," he muttered, "what big teeth you have."

Tanner hurried after him, struggling to match the length and speed of his stride. Trent burst into the house, calling angrily, "Welf! Where are you?"

She came out of the child's bedroom. "Peter?"

"How did you know?" He hurled the words at her as if they were stones.

She flinched. Where had such aggression come from? "Stop, don't understand," she said, reverting to a pidgin English she had in theory outgrown years before.

"She is at war with her self," you said."

"Yes," Welf said. "Fights self."

"Fights *you*, more like."

The doctor arrived at the doorway, gasping for breath. "Of course," Welf said, regaining composure. "We are one, she and I. She is of me. She fights herself. She fights me. Soon she will surrender. She will at last become as me. My daughter. Our daughter."

"No, no, that isn't right. She is Alice's daughter. You must understand that. Don't you?"

Welf shook her head, bewildered. "Alice is gone."

Peter raced through to his daughter's bedroom, physically pushing the pathian aside. Her transformation was obvious now. Her skin had become leathery, he knew that before long there would be scales. Her eye sockets had changed shape, and the eye colour had darkened. Her lovely eyes that had been just like her mother's. Her nose had sharpened. He stroked her hair tenderly, and recoiled in horror as a clump of it came away in his hand. "This is not my daughter," he said, shaking his head.

"She was always mine," Welf said. "Didn't you know?"

He staggered back out of the room and ran from the house.

Two days passed. He had thought about heading out into the mountains without ever looking back. But he couldn't, he had to look back. It was late morning when he walked up the steps and into the house. Breakfast plates were scattered over the table, not yet cleared away.

A young pathian woman came out of the kitchen. She stood there, seemingly confused. Instinctively he took her in his arms, holding her gently. "Red?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm still her, but I've changed."

That evening he sat in a chair on the porch. Welf came out and sat beside him and asked, "Do you think you can accept her?"

"Of course. I don't know why I ever doubted it."

"And me?"

He searched the clear night sky and found the Earth's sun. "In time," he said.

She smiled, profoundly relieved.

"I'm ashamed of my behaviour," he said.

She tilted her head slightly to one side, a characteristic gesture. "These are... confusing times."

"On Earth," he said, "there is a bird called the cuckoo, which lays its eggs in another bird's nest. I used to think that we, Alice and I, had been cuckoos, because of the way you carried our baby for us. But it was you. You were the cuckoo. You laid your own baby in our nest. It took a very long time to hatch."

She reached out a hand, resting it tenderly on his. "Cuckoo," she chirped. "What a lovely word."

Red came out and sat down on the steps. "I have to leave," she said.

"Leave?" Peter was mystified. "Why? You mustn't."

"I... have to. I don't think I can explain. It's like a compulsion, something that I feel. It's because of what's happened to me. What I've become..."

Peter turned to Welf, his face full of questions and fear.

"It is what they do," she said. "It is time for her to go. She will travel and learn. And if she chooses, some day she will return home to us."

He turned back to his daughter. "Promise me," he said.

She nodded.

The air was filled with blossom, blown in from the neighbouring fields, which always reminded him of Alice. He gathered his family, although it was past time for some of them to be in bed, and they climbed the hill together. Along the way he picked flowers, and he placed them on the grave.

"I still remember," Red told him. "I remember everything. But I'm not exactly human any more. I'm seeing things in new ways. Abstract ways. I can see the events of my life, but I'm not entirely sure how the pieces are meant to fit together."

He was afraid for her then. But she saw this in his face and said, "Don't worry about me. It just takes a little getting used to. I'll be fine."

In the morning she would leave, following new instincts, guided by new perceptions. Time is precious, he said. Like a forest, she replied. They sat together, his arms wrapped around her, talking long into the night. Sharing memories, in no particular order.

Chris Butler, whose first story for *Interzone* was "The Smart Minefield" (issue 185), is the author of the sf novel *Any Time Now* (Cosmos Books, 2001), and has published other short stories in the small press. He lives in Hove, East Sussex.

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FELLOW TRAVELLERS

Jules Verne and J.G. Ballard

Gary Westfahl & David Pringle

(Note: in 1997, as a small contribution to the programme of the combined Science Fiction Research Association / J. Lloyd Eaton Conference held in Long Beach, California, David Pringle provided a piece entitled "Time-Travellers in Global Space: On Similarities Between Jules Verne and J.G. Ballard (Notes for an Unwritten Essay)," discussing points of similarity between the authors in the form of a numbered list. I wanted to publish it in *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction*, but the book's scholarly (and stuffy) peer reviewer objected that the piece wasn't a "real" essay, and I was forced to remove it. Never forgetting this gem, I recently relocated Pringle's list and with his permission refashioned its observations to better resemble a "real" essay, also adding a few examples and comments of my own to his original argument. In what follows, to distribute credit and blame where it is due, the introductory and concluding passages are mostly Westfahl's, while the body of the essay is mostly Pringle's. — Gary Westfahl)

They were born at almost the same point in their respective centuries — in 1828 and in 1930 — and both men grew up during tumultuous times of wars and revolutions, displaying streaks of independence and rebelliousness. After flirtations with more respectable professions, in business and medicine, they began writing in their 20s, emerged as popular novelists in their 30s, and continued writing and publishing until, in their 70s, they extended their careers into a second century. Today, both men are

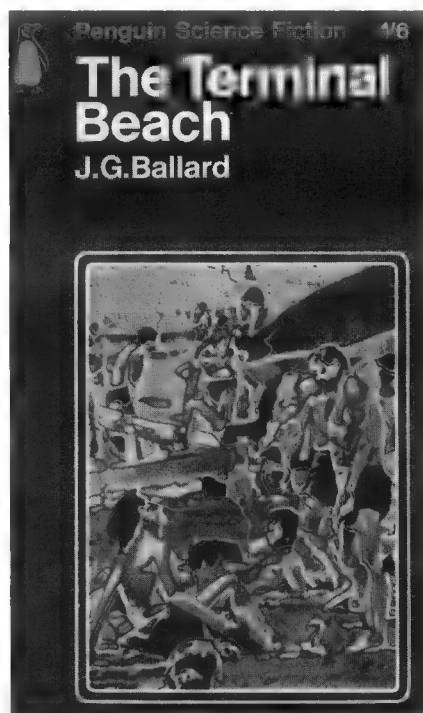
widely celebrated for their provocative contributions to science fiction.

But the preceding account would appear to exhaust all possible points of similarity between Jules Verne and J.G. Ballard. For, according to standard judgments, Verne and Ballard represent almost complete opposites. Verne, the technophilic optimist, provides expansive adventures about bold explorers venturing into unknown realms; Ballard, the technophobic pessimist, offers brooding meditations involving passive victims of natural and man-made disasters. However, standard judgments aren't always cor-

rect, and one can readily argue that, in fact, these two writers display some surprising similarities.

In the first place, both Verne and Ballard are commonly classified as science fiction writers, yet both wrote substantial amounts of mainstream fiction, or — more precisely — works which hover problematically between science fiction and mainstream fiction. At the same time, their entire oeuvres *cohere*: their works are always distinctively "Vernean" and "Ballardian." In this respect, they strongly contrast with other writers who have written both science fiction and mainstream fiction, such as H.G. Wells or Brian W. Aldiss, who tend to write *either* science fiction or mainstream fiction (usually social comedy); however, in their varied writings there is little of the problematic overlap between the two modes that characterizes Verne and Ballard.

In addition, Verne and Ballard wrote science fiction (or mainstream fiction) of a broadly similar kind: after early flirtations with futuristic fiction (Verne's long-suppressed *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, Ballard's futuristic tales such as "Chronopolis"), their stories are usually set in the present, not the future, and they eschew what some science fiction critics have called *radical exteriority*, in that they do not describe aliens or alien societies. Both writers are more concerned with depictions of their present worlds, sometimes through the distorting lens of science fiction, than with any attempt to envision *other* societies, whether on distant planets, in the far future, or in parallel worlds. Thus,



both Verne and Ballard aggressively choose to avoid most of the devices and conventions of science fiction that figure so prominently in the works of other writers like Wells and Aldiss.

Both writers further show a tendency towards what one might call the *metaphorical* rather than the *literal* use of science fiction devices. Both *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *The Drowned World* can be seen as symbolic or metaphorical tales of time travel into the deep past. True, in neither case does the act of time travel “really happen” in the course of the narrative; yet in each case, one can maintain, such imaginative travel into the geo-biological past is what the novel is actually *about*.

Verne and Ballard both can be said to employ in their prose – or at least to strive for – a kind of “poetry of science” characterized by their frequent descriptions of landscapes, their rhapsodies that utilize scientific and technical terms, and an occasionally tendency to climax in a kind of vision-ary mysticism. The objects of their attention are often ruins. This is how Verne describes Nemo and Aronnax’s discovery of the underwater Atlantis in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*:

And, in fact, there beneath my eyes, ruined, crumbled and destroyed, lay a town with its roofs caved in, its temples falling down, its arches out of place and its columns lying on the ground. In all these fragments one could see the solid proportions of a kind of Tuscan architecture. Farther on there were the remains of a giant aqueduct; here lay an encrusted mound of some Acropolis, with the floating forms of a Parthenon; there the remains of a dock, as if from some antique port that had once sheltered merchant ships and triremes of war at the shore of an extinct sea; yet further on, long lines of crumbling walls and deserted streets. (Trans. Anthony Bonner, Bantam, 1962, p256)

Compare this passage to Ballard’s descriptions of the abandoned nuclear-test island of Eniwetok in “The Terminal Beach”:

On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon... Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms, and shower stalls. A wrecked juke-box lay half-buried in the

sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack. (*The Terminal Beach*, Penguin, 1966, p139-140)

As another one of their similarities, Verne and Ballard can be regarded as “global writers” in a way that few others have been, setting their stories all over the world. Admittedly, this is more obvious in the case of Verne (the first truly global novelist, which explains why he is the most widely translated of all fiction writers), but Ballard follows suit, if a little less obviously, as demonstrated by the African settings of *The Crystal World* and *The Day of Creation*, the Chinese setting of *Empire of the Sun*, the implied Canadian setting of *The Drought*, and the French setting of *Super-Cannes*. Both, then, are in a real sense *anti-parochial* writers; they exude no nationalistic biases, as opposed to, say, the aura of Britishness that permeates Wells’s works or the aggressive Americanism of Robert A. Heinlein.

Both authors are *ironists* – a fact often not appreciated in the case of Verne, largely due to poor English-language translations which destroy his ironic tone, dumbing him down to the level of the “boys’ book.” Critic Marc Angenot provides a telling example: in the standard English translation of *The Mysterious Island*, with reference to the suppression of the 1857 Indian Mutiny, Verne is made to say: “Civilization never recedes. The law of necessity ever forces it onwards.” What Verne actually wrote, according to Angenot’s literal translation, is: “Right, once again, had succumbed in the face of might. But civilization never recedes, and it seems that it bor-

rows all its rights from necessity.” The last sentence strikes us as a chilling irony – worthy of Ballard, in fact. (This is one reason why it is not entirely accurate to label Verne as an “optimist” and Ballard as a “pessimist”: on a deeper level than at first meets the eye, there is plenty of “pessimism” in Verne, just as one finds an equal amount of “optimism” in Ballard.)

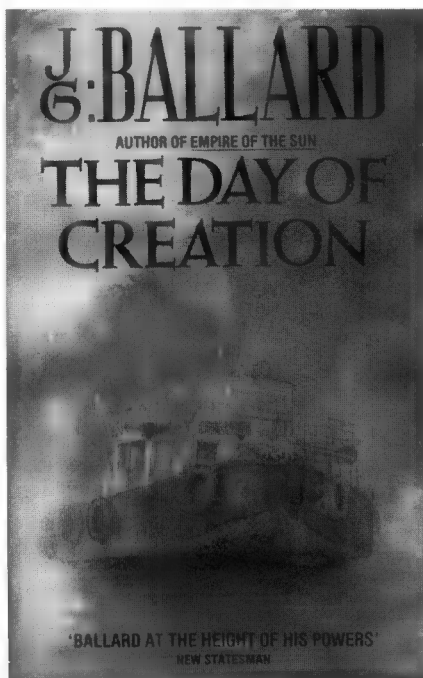
Examining their many stories, one can detect all sorts of similarities in the subjects they address, and the sorts of stories they choose to tell. Both writers are obsessed with the conventions of the desert-island story or Robinsonade – Verne in *The Mysterious Island*, *The School for Crusoes*, and many other works; Ballard in “The Terminal Beach,” *Concrete Island*, *Rushing to Paradise*, and elsewhere. No doubt reflecting their unsettled upbringings – Verne’s attempt to run away from home by stowing away on a ship, Ballard’s youthful experiences in a prisoner-of-war camp – both frequently employ the motif of the “orphan,” or the youngster alone (e.g. Verne’s “Foundling Mick” and Ballard’s “Shanghai Jim”). Both writers display a satirical fascination with the United States of America: Verne in *From the Earth to the Moon* and its sequels, Ballard in *Hello America*, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and various short stories. Verne and Ballard share a certain fascination with machines – Verne’s many tales of amazing new vehicles, Ballard’s *Crash* – and images of flight abound in the works of both authors.

Finally, though debatably, both authors stood out from their contemporaries in their stunningly prescient priorities. Most novelists in Verne’s day were fascinated by the rise of urban civilization and the resulting social problems that afflicted all classes of society; depending on their tastes, they wrote stories about mansions and drawing rooms, or factories and slums.

To Verne, however, the developments that most merited attention were the present and future advances in transportation and communication that were leading humans into new realms and bringing all the peoples of the world into contact with each other; in contrast, examining the new challenges and difficulties of life in the big city seemed a sterile, petty enterprise. This is one reason why readers of the 20th and 21st centuries, living in the technologically-transformed and unified world that Verne provided intimations of, have remained interested in Verne’s stories, while all but the very best of the chroniclers of Victorian urban society have been forgotten.

Ballard entered the field of science fiction at a time when most authors, on both sides of the Atlantic, had





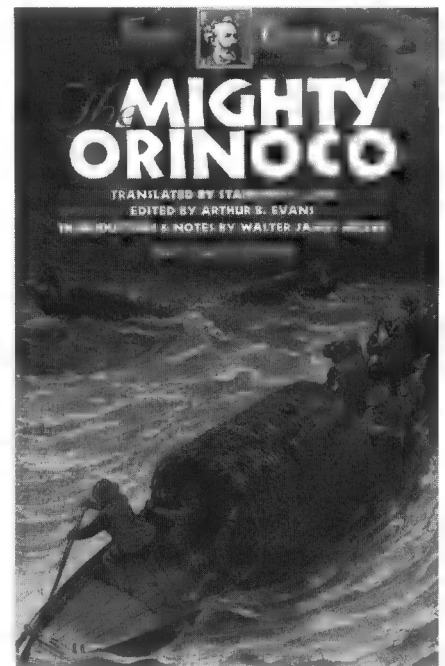
embraced the notion that humanity's future lay in outer space; they uniformly predicted that people would rapidly progress beyond the planet Earth, establishing colonies on the Moon and other planets and eventually embarking on interstellar flights. The best and brightest humans would enthusiastically abandon Earth to join in this great adventure, leaving the planet to decline into decadence and unimportance. While the New Wave of the 1960s briefly threatened the hegemony of this monomyth, it came back with a vengeance in the 1970s and thereafter, fuelled by the popularity of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

Almost uniquely, Ballard foresaw that the American and Russian space programmes would actually have little impact on humanity's future, that their rockets and the grandiose plans linked to them would someday be abandoned. Oblivious to dreams of outer space, he resolutely focused his attention on what he termed "the only

truly alien planet," Earth, and the troubled lives of the people who would remain forced to reside there. Today, with a manned space programme that hasn't ventured beyond near-Earth orbit in 30 years – and sometimes doesn't even do that very well – it is becoming increasingly apparent that human efforts to conquer the universe are indefinitely stalled at the very first stage, demanding renewed attentiveness to the future prospects of human life on Earth, not in space. And, as Heinlein-esque sagas of space adventure and *Star Trek* novels increasingly seem more like diverting fantasies than realistic projections of our future, Ballard's down-to-earth dramas may, like Verne's novels, remain more interesting to future readers than what will seem in retrospect the myopically space-oriented stories of his contemporaries.

This brings us to what might be regarded as these writers' most important similarities: they were leaders, not followers. They both studied the worlds around them, reached their own conclusions, and stubbornly produced their own sorts of stories, oblivious to changing fashions. If Verne seems less bold than Ballard, that may simply reflect his willingness to be restrained by conservative publisher Jules Hetzel, while Ballard had no comparable figure to dampen the extremes of his creative impulses. Still, something unique and valuable shines through in both of their bodies of work, as others have repeatedly recognized. There is no need to describe how Verne inspired countless imitators; and virtually every writer of the New Wave, and key science fiction writers of every subsequent generation, have cited Ballard as a major influence.

There are prices to pay, of course, when a writer strays from the crowd and follows his own path. Neither writer has really received the critical respect he deserves: Verne to this day is looked down upon as *déclassé* by most French critics, and Ballard has



faced the disdain of both mainstream critics who disparage "science fiction writers" and science fiction critics who dislike what they perceive as his unseemly passivity and pessimism. And writers who ignore generic conventions and effectively develop their own personal genres can themselves fall victim to the generic conventions they create, so that there were times in both Verne's and Ballard's careers when they were accused of becoming monotonous, offering only new variations on familiar themes. Still, writers can be forgiven for occasionally being repetitive if we determine that they have also been *right* – and that certainly seems to be true in the cases of Jules Verne and J.G. Ballard.

Gary Westfahl & David Pringle

Ref.: Angenot, Marc. "Jules Verne: The Last Happy Utopianist," in Parrinder, Patrick, ed. *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, London: Longman, 1979, p18-33.



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"really cool" - Rodger ...
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"one of the best fiction ... on the web" - LineOne SF Club
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ANSIBLE LINK-2



DAVID LANGFORD

Roving reporter Jeff VanderMeer covered the traditional Rowling Riots in June: "Ann and I went down to the local B&N to witness the Harry Potter madness. The mall parking lot was packed. The kids and adults had destroyed the magazine and children's sections. There was no way we could get a book. So, instead, we waited outside. A kid came out, probably all of nine years old. A little girl with braces and a smile on her face. As per our pre-arranged plan, Ann distracted her with some glitter and a pinwheel. Then I snatched the book out of the girl's hands and ran for it while Ann hightailed it back to the car. The girl was screaming her head off, but, luckily, there were so many people around I was able to lose myself in the crowd. Ann then drove round to pick me up. I was hiding where we'd planned for me to, at the darkened South Entrance. It all went off without a hitch. Another successful midnight Potter party intervention for us." Believe him or not, as you prefer.

THE SEEDS OF TIME

Arthur C. Clarke has another little brag: "I think I can claim to be the godfather (with the good and bad implications that has) of the Web. Tim Berners Lee acknowledges that my story 'Dial For Frankenstein' (*Playboy*, January 1964) was one of the many inputs that started him thinking on these lines." (*Aerospace America*, May 2003) So, no doubt, was Fredric Brown's slightly earlier "Answer" from 1954.

Simon R. Green continues to ingratiate himself: "You will be appearing in the final Deathstalker book, and yes, once again you get to die horribly. Your head explodes, on the dark side of the moon." Gosh, thanks. But haven't we heard this "final Deathstalker book" claim before?

H.P. Lovecraft is in the news again, with the first ("Spring 2004") issue of *H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* now scheduled for October 2003 publication by Wildside Press. See also www.cthuugle.com...

Terry Pratchett regrets that Wincanton, Somerset, twinned since last year with Discworld's Ankh-Morpork, has been officially forbidden to mention this intangible link on road signs. "Somerset County Council wanted Ankh-Morpork added to the signs but Whitehall refused, saying twin towns had to actually exist." (BBC News Online, 18 June)

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. Paper Tiger's parent company was singled out after a Society of Authors survey of publishers' ways: "Chrysalis Books took a beating from authors – no great surprise to any member who has had dealings with the company of late. [...] As we go to press we are helping a number of members who have turned to the Society in despair about very slow payment." (*The Author*, Summer 2003)

R.I.P. Ken Grimwood (1944-2003), US radio journalist and author best known for the World Fantasy Award-winning novel *Replay* (1986), died in California on 6 June, aged 59. *Replay* gained a considerable cult following; Grimwood was reportedly working on a sequel. • **James England**, UK author of the single sf novel *The Measured Caverns* (1978), and for decades a member of the BSFA and associated writers' groups, died in May. He was in his late sixties. • **David Newman** (1937-2003), Oscar-nominated US screenwriter who co-wrote the scripts of the first three *Superman* films (1978-83), and *Santa Claus: The Movie* (1985), died on 27 June aged 66. • **George and Jan O'Nale**, who as the small US press Cheap Street produced fine sf/fantasy chapbooks since 1981, committed suicide together on 27 May. Both were 56. • **Gregory Peck** (1916-2003), US film actor who needs no introduction, died on 12 May aged 87. His genre films include *On the Beach* (1959), *Marooned* (1969), *The Omen* (1976) and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978).

As Others See Us. For the sake of my sanity, further outbreaks of Margaret Atwood have been censored. Oh, all right, just the one. Science fiction, as opposed to what she writes, is distinguished by "talking squids in outer space." (BBC 1 Breakfast News)

Thog's Classical-Scientific-Etymological Special. "Athena was per-

haps the first mythical character to undergo parthenogenesis, having emerged fully formed from the forehead of her father, Zeus. Hence her temple on the Acropolis is called The Parthenon." (Steve Connor, *Independent Science Editor*, 10 June)

Signs of the Times. The UK division of the on-line bookseller which I had better refer to only as Huge-SouthAmericanRiver cut its freelance reviewer rates by 20% in June. Grumble, grump.

Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, will be commemorated on a 68p postage stamp in September – well, almost. The Royal Mail's busy Scraping The Barrel Division came up with the idea of celebrating "classic transport toys," including Mettoy's friction-drive Space Ship Eagle (c 1960) from the Dare saga. Be still, my beating heart.

Bram Stoker Awards for horror... Life Achievement: J. N. Williamson, Stephen King. Novel: Tom Piccirilli, *The Night Class*. First Novel: Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*. Long Fiction: (tie) Thomas Ligotti, "My Work Is Not Yet Done", and Brian A. Hopkins, *El Dia de Los Muertos*. Short Fiction: Tom Piccirilli, "The Misfit Child Grows Fat on Despair." Collection: Ray Bradbury, *One More for the Road*. Anthology: John Pelan (ed.), *The Darker Side: Generations of Horror*. Nonfiction: Ramsey Campbell, *Ramsey Campbell, Probably*. Illustrated Narrative: Robert Weinberg, *Nightside*. Screenplay: Brant Hanley, *Frailty*. Younger Readers: Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*. Poetry: Mark McLaughlin, Rain Graves & David Niall Wilson, *The Gossamer Eye*. Alternative Forms: Steve & Melanie Tem, "Imagination Box."

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Chronological Anomaly*. "Twenty-four hours. One day, Tucker calculated. Maybe two, if he was lucky." (Taylor Smith, *The Innocents Club*, 2000) • *Eyeballs in the Sky Dept*. "His eyes crawled up the wall before him." (China Miéville, *King Rat*, 1998) • *Dept of Regrettable Ambiguity*. "Her dress was ragged at the hem, and too short as the clear air pulled her up tall, but her cheeks were flushed with excitement." (Joan Hunter Holly, *The Green Planet*, 1960) • *Dept of Future Slang*. "Back in the twentieth century," he explained, "Bellman of the Rand Corporation predicted 2% of the work force would be able to produce all the country could consume by the year 2000 and..." "Don't roach me funkier," she said. "And don't shirk off in your electro-steamer. This mopsy wants to poke." (Mack Reynolds, *Commune 2000 A.D.*, 1974)

I don't want to retread too many familiar rhetorical patterns when discussing William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (Viking, £16.99). The temptation is surely there: Gibson "has written a contemporary thriller because the world has caught up with the literary inventions of cyberpunk," I might be expected to suggest. Or perhaps "the post-9/11 world, a focus of part of the novel's narrative, has compelled sf to go mainstream." Or I could argue that Gibson has really written an "sf novel that just happens to resemble a present-day thriller." These "quotes" will, as far as I'm concerned, all have to remain parts of imaginary reviews of *Pattern Recognition*. Perhaps you'll unearth them elsewhere.

Instead, I want to focus on how, in this novel, William Gibson appears to be wrestling with "William Gibson" the theorists' darling and postmodernists' favourite. For one of the games author plays with reader is cueing a Gibsonian template. The heroine of *Pattern Recognition* is Cayce Pollard, whose first name is thought to be "Case" early on in the novel. We're informed that her name should be pronounced "Casey," but that Ms Pollard has converted it into a homonym of "Case" (p31). This fires a spark of recognition across *Neuromancer* (Case being that novel's hero, of course) and *Pattern Recognition*, implying that Gibson is self-consciously using his previous work as one important pattern of meaning that has to be negotiated with and acknowledged. *Neuromancer* is, in this interpretation, a canonical artefact that stands, monolith-like, casting its long shadow over the the new novel. And *Pattern Recognition* knows that – welcomes it, even, before indulging in shadow play.

Other connections between this novel and Gibson's earlier work surface soon enough. Cayce is a "footage-head," a follower of strange fragments of digitized film that have emerged online without auteurist provenance, and a participant on the newsgroup "Fetish: Footage: Forum." This allows Gibson to explore the intensities and machinations of popular culture, fictionally mapping the birth and development of a fan subculture. Media culture has consistently preoccupied William Gibson, whether through the figures of the *Idoru* and the otaku, or as here, via a mysterious series of texts devoid of obvious publicity and marketing, made all the more alluring for this lack. It is a great irony of Gibson's writing, I think, that while establishing a reputation as one of the foremost "literary" sf writers, his focus has repeatedly fallen on media fictions/creations and their energetic presence in characters' lives. Proclaiming the significance of media-driven lives (and cyberpunk is/was a part of this, where the medium became ever

William Gibson, Post-Cyberpunk: From Consensual Hallucinations to Unanticipated Obsessions

Matt Hills

more immersive, intensive and self-enclosing), *Pattern Recognition* is always partly about recognizing media-derived loves. It is a fans' charter, a manifesto for expressing cultural passions. As one character concludes near the novel's end: "You watched a subculture being born... evolving exponentially." And this sentiment is developed: "We hadn't anticipated the numbers... but neither had we anticipated the level of obsession engendered in the audience, or the depth of the desire to solve the mystery." (p337)

William Gibson's post-cyberpunk writing – and I mean "post" not just in the sense of coming after, but also in the sense of revisiting, reworking and challenging – is all about fictionally shaping, and so controlling, the matter of obsession. Is this, I wonder, the response of an author who finds himself remade as a brand and carried aloft by academic and fan fixations with his own reputation-making earlier work? Is it also a response to the unpredictability of science fiction and its subcultural impacts: did the younger Gibson, cast in the role of footage-maker, ever imagine that *Neuromancer* would achieve what it did, helping to give birth to a cyber-subculture? Having been subjected to fan and critical near-obsession himself, Gibson's later works have undoubtedly dwelt increasingly on the chaotic contingency-made-destiny of obsession, seeking to tame it through fictionalization and repetition.

Pattern Recognition is also a response to the unpredictability of world-historical events, events that appear without precedent, warning or foreshadowing. Obsession – this time the fundamentalist's rather than the fan's – may always be unanticipated, but it sustains its own brand of anticipation. Obsession



REVIEWED

invents its own timeline, remaking the world into an effortlessly predictable mechanism. *Pattern Recognition* isn't just about the cognitive mapping carried out by Homo sapiens, it is also about the fact of human obsession, and how that fact can unpredictably reinvent us personally and culturally, leaving a changed but newly-predictable world in its wake.

Along with the Case/Cayce coincidence, Gibson loads other semi-jokes/semi-references into the obsessive-compulsive proceedings, such as depicting a collector who is keen to acquire "Stephen King's Wang" word processor (p216 and p247), a mention that immediately calls to mind the publicity received over the years by the manual typewriter on which, pre-1985, Gibson wrote, and hence on which he composed *Neuromancer*. Such was the unanticipated level of obsession with Gibson's typewriter that it even had an essay named after it, Scott Bukatman's to-the-point "Gibson's Typewriter" (in *Flame Wars*, edited by Mark Dery). Bukatman tells us that the typewriter in question is "green (actually green and black), with celluloid keys of canary yellow. It's heavy; it's flammable; it's a 'tough and elegant' Swiss machine from the shop of E. PAILLARD & CIE S. A. YVERDON. It was once owned by a journalist, but it remained in the family. It was expensive. It's a Hermes 2000" (*Flame Wars* p71).

The author-as-brand and as an authenticating presence hovers over this type of detail, both in fan and journalistic coverage of Gibson's work, as Bukatman's writing shows, and in the fictional world of *Pattern Recognition*. References to "King's Wang" chime with the novel's larger thesis, that brands are the omnipresent language



of Western and Eastern societies, and that they conserve an experience of authenticity for their devotees, often through the mediation of an auteur-as-source. Stephen King's word processor becomes, then, a fleeting but fitting objective correlative for Cayce's quest to meet the maker of the footage: a piece of the author's material world that can be owned, a fragment of fannish passion that can be cashed in and held in physical form, and a closing of the gap between the fan and their object of desire.

Combining actual world references and fictional world auteurs, Gibson doesn't just use existent brands to provoke instants of recognition. More than that, he uses brands as part of the novel's most interesting conceit, namely that Cayce Pollard has an unusual sensitivity to logos. This sensitivity enables Cayce to work as a marketing consultant for firms, assessing whether or not their designs are likely to captivate mass markets. Logos provoke a powerful, visceral reaction in Cayce. This means that she has to take care in her everyday life, lest she be overwhelmed by the branding all around her. She cuts logos off her clothing, and pursues design anonymity. Gibson (but most definitely not Cayce) has some fun with Tommy Hilfiger as a brand early on in the novel, and follows this up with a Michelin Man riff, but after these set-pieces, Cayce's brand-sense drifts into the background somewhat. Of course, it has worked its magic by this point, marking Cayce Pollard out as heroine material, and reassuring author and reader alike that heroic difference is still possible in the building-block world of brand sameness. Logos are made into an ambivalent part of this difference rather than merely posing a threat to Cayce's uniqueness.

Brands and their cultural lives have long been an abiding Gibsonian focus, and here the take is, again, partly a departure and partly a routine. Marketing isn't just background colour or part of global corporate domination: it is the stuff of Cayce's life, her livelihood as much as her phobia. Brands are placed more obviously at the centre of things, and are more thoroughly psychologized in this novel, than ever before in Gibson's work. Given an individualistic depth through Cayce's condition as well as via her mission to track down the footage at source, the commodity fetish and its control are Gibson's subject matter. Drawing on what's become known in actuality as "ambient marketing" (where people are paid to "casually" discuss new products with strangers in pubs and bars) and exploring semiotic battles between

fans and producers, *Pattern Recognition* is equal parts erudition and sensation. Not being afraid to invoke the language of cultural theory, even while not-so-gently lampooning terms like "hegemonic" (p315), Gibson tracks the ways in which new trends are improvised and then converted into commercial fashion, and the ways in which collectors' and fans' desires are systematized into markets:

"The market is not yet entirely rationalized, you see... Not yet established as a global specialist environment. As has long been the case, for instance, with rare stamps, or coins. ... One still finds the odd example gathering dust on a shelf, perhaps for relatively little. All such markets are being rationalized by the Internet, of course." (p230-1)

It is Cayce's job to aid this market formation by finding the footage-maker for her boss, one Hubertus Bigend. Hubertus hopes to co-opt the footage as a piece of spectacularly successful neo-marketing, turning its fans' obsessions into a vast money-spinner. Being one such obsessed fan, CayceP will have to choose between professional and intensely personal allegiances, between "cool-hunting" for Bigend's firm, or footage-loving in her private life.

Cayce's quest has another target. As well as searching for the piercing art of the footage, she is also after closure of a very different sort. Her father, US intelligence agent Win Pollard, disappeared without trace near the World Trade Centre on September 11th, 2001. Without a body to bury, Cayce is left in a state of enduring limbo, hoping that Win may still be alive somehow, but knowing this is highly unlikely. The mystery of Win and "his missingness" (p344) might lead readers to expect a certain type of spy thriller *denouement*, but Gibson quite deliberately avoids a whizz-bang twist ending, perhaps on the principle that some plot twists are so tediously predictable, it's only their absence that can generate any real surprise. There are a number of revelations to be had towards the conclusion of *Pattern Recognition*, but they are strangely underplayed, if not muted, amid a welter of detail. In view of the thriller form that precedes them, Gibson's resolutions appear out of kilter and exceedingly chatty, as if "tell don't show" has to be the mantra for globe-spanning, email-posting, post-cyberpunk narrative. But perhaps it's worth recalling that *Neuromancer*, too, ended on a curiously flat note, throwing away its big picture ending in pieces of slightly blasé dialogue. If the new novel intends to provoke further Gibsonian resonances with its endpoint, then it achieves these dimly felt recognitions, because Cayce's journey is all expedited energy, all rushing here-and-there, whilst her final arrival is an anti-cli-

max, plain and simple. Or maybe this shows us that narrative, like the footage fans' unanticipated "level of obsession," is infinitely more entrancing while it is in process than when it alights on the object of its pursuit.

Following on from Cayce's bizarre brand phobia, *Pattern Recognition* also discusses "apophenia," which is given as the title of Chapter 12, and defined by Win Pollard as "the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things" (p115). It is apophenia that threatens to dissipate the novel's conspiracy theories and narratives: some perceived patterns may, after all, be nothing but "errors." And yet... If patterns are made, if links are established across unrelated things, then surely we should not rush to dismiss such cultural creativity? Otherwise, along with jettisoning conspiracy theory, we would need to forfeit the power of metaphor and the creativity of much poetic language, as well as the perspective-shifting of some critical thought. "Recognizing" patterns may be about creating them as much as finding them, without ever being fully able to tell the difference between what you've made and what you've found (after all, even scientific laws – created or found? – can provoke religious sentiment).

And in that spirit, I'd best leave open the question of whether this has been an exercise in book reviewer's apophenia, wherein I have forged (made and falsified?) links between the unrelated – other than by authorial provenance – *Neuromancer* and *Pattern Recognition*. Having already suggested that the name "Cayce" recalls "Case," the earlier novel's protagonist, apophenia could push us even further into an exploration of Gibson's encrypted word games or pattern recognitions. Look back at the name of the shop that, we are told by Scott Bukatman, sold Gibson's typewriter. Take the first surname and all other initials and you get PAIL-LARD, E. C. S. A. Y. Or "CASEY PAIL-LARD," a startlingly near homonym for the full name of *Pattern Recognition*'s heroine. This can (surely?) only be a coincidence, even given Gibson's references to Stephen King's Wang and its provenance, and given this novel's focus on types of encryption such as steganography. Perhaps there is no meaningful link between the shop that sold "Gibson's Typewriter" and post-cyberpunk, logo-sensitive "Cayce Pollard." Even if patterns can be generated. But there is a powerful connection between Gibson's post-cyberpunk vision in *Pattern Recognition* and his earlier work: the latest novel's narrative reflects on unanticipated fan obsessions, implying that cyberpunk and the reception of Gibson's prior *oeuvre* (and typewriter) can be viewed as just one such obsession.

Matt Hills

interzone

Conceits concerning cities – particularly London – continue in Ian R. MacLeod's *The Light Ages* (Earthlight, £17.99; Ace, \$23.95), adding to the recent trend toward urban fabulation that has included Miéville's *New Crobuzon* and VanderMeer's *Ambergris*, and which was remarked on in last issue's review of K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City*. Similarly, metropolitan landscapes have provided a popular focus for the setting for any number of alternate histories, from the more literary purviews of Jeffrey Ford's *A Portrait of Mrs Charbuque* to the simpler adventures of S. M. Stirling's *Conquistador*. Many, it seems, are finding cities attractive as a rich motif for mining; not unexpected considering they define most of our daily experience of life, exemplifying, both as symbol and identity, contemporary Western society and culture far more than the medieval imaginings associated with traditional fantasy since Tolkien. The latter address desires for a world that never was whereas the former appear to be exploring or reflecting present experience through settings and themes that in their very strangeness provide a distorted glimpse of a hidden world disguised behind what, in our own, is mundane or taken-for-granted. And perhaps of all the recent works that have attempted this, none has blurred the lines between the familiar and unfamiliar, or convention and imagination, as successfully as Ian MacLeod's.

The Light Ages creates an all-too-credible illusion of an alternate world immediately mysterious and well-known. With a Dickensian sense of locale and character more subtle than Miéville's, MacLeod creates an imaginary period of English history in which past and present, history and legend – perhaps even the future – blur and merge, continually shifting perspective yet assuming a fictional form tangible and already known to the reader even though revealed often as though through the memory of dream. There is a prosaic surrealism in the narrative, in which magic is reduced to mere utility and science offers an alternate wonder, where figures of myth and fairy tale are subverted into invalids, domestic pets or the result of industrial accidents. Spells are the fabrication of tradesmen and sorcery is a form of mechanics. Though horror abounds, it exists as much in the quotas of production or social custom as the monstrosities locked away in asylums or allowed to dwell secretly on the fringes of society. And within the novel the boundaries between the narrative world and the Other, between the real and fiction, are never entirely clear.

This book has one of the more memorable openings I have encountered, not because of its narrative action or char-

Another City

William Thompson

acters but because of its prose and setting, which immediately establishes a sense of the alien coexisting within the ordinary, and a fluidity of time as well as mystery that this chapter vividly suggests the rest of the novel will fulfil. The author's evocative imagery and prose continues as the story unfolds as reminiscence, recounting the life of the central character, Robert Barrows, an introspective youth living in Bracebridge, Brownheath, Yorkshire during the third Industrial Age. Almost 300 years since the overthrow of the Age of Kings, England as well as the Continent has evolved into a manufacturing and mercantile centre, dependant on the mining and production of *aether* which fuels as well as provides the material substance for the spells used to fashion and maintain society's technology. Luminescent, visible at night as *wyreglow*, *aether* is the basis for everything: it provides the magical motive power behind manufacturing, transportation, construction, communication and the economy. One's relationship to its production and use determines one's social standing, from the impoverished and disenfranchised *marts* to the workers and captains of industry. Its control is strictly and secretively governed by the Guilds, along with the population, and a hierarchical oligarchy has developed predicated upon the management of its production and use. And though their power is magical and secular, the grandmasters of the Guilds live like the nobility of old, in vast estates set far apart from the neighbourhoods of the poor or working guildsmen, classes divided into castes whose status and material well-being reflects their access to the source of production. *Aether* is means and end, purpose and identity, and has insinuated itself into every aspect of society.

Robert Barrows is born into the Guild of Lesser Toolmakers, inheriting both his father's trade and social status. The rural town he lives in has a pulse, the boom of engines delving deep into the ground to extract the seams of precious *aether*. Their concussion can be felt and heard day and night, and governs the town's daily life. His father works in the mine at Clawtson & Mawdingly, as did his mother and most of the villagers, and the son is expected to follow in his father's footsteps. He

already bears the "Mark of the Elder... God's ultimate blessing" that identifies him as human as well as guildsman, and once he begins to work he will bear the haft marks that identify his trade. But Robert dreams of fairy tales his mother read to him, wondrous fables about changelings and a legendary kingdom both old and new. He watches the trains passing through Bracebridge, carrying their luminous cars of *aether*, and imagines they "would bear me far away from Bracebridge, yet always closer to the edge of some deeper truth about my life which I always felt myself to be teetering on. And I was sure that truth would be marvellous."

This childhood fancy will become a reality, driven by events and horror that will overtake his mother. He accompanies her on a mysterious visit to a ruined manor where he meets two actual changelings, an old woman and a seemingly human though fey girl. Shortly after this visit his mother retreats to her room, and though his family tries to pretend it's just a temporary illness, strange sounds can be heard emanating from the room, and Robert tries to avoid all further contact with her. But eventually the truth can no longer be disguised, and it is obvious that she is undergoing a transformation, a metamorphosis into monstrosity that will ultimately cost her life. The repercussions of this event, and the secret of its cause, will set Robert on a path to London in search of a truth he is warned will never be "for what you think."

This is a complicated novel, rich in metaphor and symbolism, in which traditional tropes of fairy tale and fantasy assume new and uneasy guises, coexisting side by side with a storyline that on its surface mimics the quasi-Victorian era around which it is structured. Carried by his vibrant prose and his imaginative reinvention of earlier conventions of literature, MacLeod mixes the artifices of 19th-century fiction into a surreal vision of London and society that Dickens would have felt at home in (as well as alienated from). And equally strange resonances are detected with our own world, even when disguised as magic or the landscape of *faerie*. The reliance upon *aether*, despite its depletion, bears eerie if not exact resemblance to some of our own technologies, as does the technocracy that has grown out of it. And more obvious are the political themes contrasting socialism with the exploitive inequalities of capitalism, though interestingly enough both systems by the end appear hollow in the face of some deeper, mysterious insight, never fully revealed, perhaps hinted at in the beginning when Robert is asked to tell the story of "how it was [he] became human."



Similar tensions exist that remain equally and intentionally unresolved, such as the juxtaposition of the beauty and magic of the Midsummer Night's Ball, with its references to Cinderella, and the seductive illusion it represents, "laid for us all, offering us these bright glimpses... which of [their] very nature, could never belong to more than a parasitic few..." Change and promise are motifs repeated throughout the novel, at times seemingly posed in obvious opposition, yet accompanied by an ultimate sense of loss, with wonder in the end oddly replaced by the banal. Splendour exists amidst squalor, magic amidst the mundane. Perspective intentionally and subtly alters, and one continually feels as if one is looking through a series of narrative veils: the distance imposed upon the story by Robert as passive observer; the differing existence that divides the fairy-tale lives of the affluent from the squalid poverty of the poor; the marvels of aether versus the magical character of the changelings, they themselves identified alternately as beautiful and grotesque. And there is a persistent dreamlike quality that constantly questions the narrator's and therefore the reader's experience, whether suggested as "a sleep that would last a lifetime of endless duty and disappointment," a slumber "with promises of small glories until you awoke, still wondering from life itself," or the drug-induced visions of a dream mistress to whom Robert eventually returns to re-experience the "incredible adventures that will take us to the deeper truth on which I have always felt my life to be teetering."

This is not a story that can be consumed in a single sitting, and only those willing to revisit the narrative will appreciate its many rich and elusive layers. Those not willing will have to be satisfied with the author's haunting prose and unforgettable characters and imagination, as well as images and scenes of wonder that will linger long after the book is put away. And the more reflective reader will likely be dogged by a suspicion that for a brief moment, they caught sight of a mystery that stayed just out of view. As for myself, and at the risk of spoiling the novel's conclusion, "I still don't know what that truth is, but I'm sure that, when I find it, it will be marvellous."

Quite different in focus, although, within the more conventional limits of its ambition, equally well-written, is Chris Wooding's *The Weavers of Saramyr*, "Book One of *The Braided Path*," (Gollancz, £17.99 hc; £10.99 pb). Until now noted for his children's fiction, this is the author's first foray into mature fantasy, and one that is likely

to gain him a wide audience. Notable for its taut pacing and imaginative plot, it is one of the better epic fantasies I have read so far this year.

"Kaiku was twenty harvests of age the first time she died." Meant to grab the reader's attention, Wooding's introduction immediately establishes a tight focus and quick narrative rhythm that the author never loses during the 300-and-some pages that follow. Swiftly moving through conflict and intrigue, Wooding creates an old-fashioned page-turner that seems, deceptively or not, fresh in its imaginative approach, as well as engaging in its plot and characters. The author is adept at constructing a tense drama that dispenses with much of the usual descriptive padding; and he does so while creating a complex fictional realm vividly realized yet swept by narrative action that rarely seems lacking in credibility. While no one is likely to regard this as being anything more than entertaining, it exemplifies all one could ask from action-adventure.

Set within an imperial landscape that borrows from Japanese culture and folklore, though without becoming too overt in doing so, the novel centres on a young woman, with a strong supporting cast. Awoken from death by her handmaid, and in a manner that casts suspicion as to her servant's identity, she discovers her family has been poisoned. Nor is this the only threat, as something even more sinister is stalking the house. Forced to flee, and confused over what has taken place, she learns that the cause of her family's murder is a mask brought into her household by her father. Its origins are unclear, and her handmaid is equally cryptic as to its identity as well as her own, stating only that she has been sent to guard the girl under the guise of a servant, though by whom and why receives no answer. Any opportunity for Kaiku to learn the truth becomes lost when she is overtaken by a mysterious and terrible seizure, causing the death of her guardian.

Kaiku's search to discover the reasons for her family's murder, as well as the source of her sudden and deadly malady leads her into a web of conspiracy to control the future of the Saramyr Empire. And she will learn that this future is tied to the health of the land as well as her own identity. In the process she will be hunted by unknown foes, become a threat to herself and those around her, be betrayed by her closest friend, and encounter unlooked-for and dangerous allies. For she is an Aberrant, hated and feared by the world she lives in.

While this bare synopsis seems broadly familiar, the particulars of the story are not. Wooding refreshes what is essentially a standard set of premises by creating a narrative world and underlying conflicts that are not only

sharply rendered, but often original in conception. Yes, some of the usual tropes are present: a young person with a secret identity; the outsider; the identification and well-being of the land; an exotic culture partially lifted from one of our own; wizards barely disguised; and the usual struggle for a throne. But Wooding re-contextualizes their borrowing sufficiently to make them his own.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his conceit of the Weavers and the system of magic they employ. While superficially they represent the usual wizardly advisers, Wooding has subverted them in his portrayal of their degradation and madness. And the magical Weave they inhabit and draw power from is in many ways a dark Piranesian labyrinth of threads whose true nature remains uncertain. The usual divisions between good and evil are often blurred, whereas elsewhere the Children of the Moon are forces of chaos, just as it appears is much of the mythological lore around which the novel is structured. And the use of masks, with their supernatural aspect, while obviously having a basis in Japanese folklore, is being directed here for an entirely different if related purpose.

There exists a dark undertone beneath the romantic trappings, which carries over into the novel's characterization. Most of Wooding's players are multidimensional, possessing flaws or deadly character traits as well as qualities more sympathetic. Nor is Wooding hesitant about killing off some of his lead players, including those the reader is most ready to identify with. In this respect, as well as others, this novel joins other recent work by writers such as George R.R. Martin or Steven Erikson, bringing a grimmer atmosphere to conventional fantasy, as well as a moral system that is more relative than the simple black-and-white divisions inherited from Tolkien (though earlier expressions of this can be found in the writing of Moorcock or Donaldson).

But what most sets this novel most apart from its many contemporaries is its relentless pacing and the author's adroit ability to spin new plots out of old without their ever appearing extraneous or unrelated to the forward progress of the primary narrative. And in many respects this novel characterizes the thematic Weave central to its telling. Combined with a febrile imagination and a clear vision of the tale unfolding, as well as the world and characters which richly populate it, Mr Wooding has turned in an excellent yarn that should gain an immediate and appreciative audience. And in no small part this is due to his never once losing sight of his story's underlying spirit of drama and adventure. Others could learn by his example.

William Thompson

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anders, Lou, ed. **Live Without a Net**. Afterword by Pat Cadigan. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45925-3, 321pp, trade paperback, cover by John Picacio, \$14.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains original stories about "an alternate Information Age," by Stephen Baxter, David Brin, Paul Di Filippo, John Grant, Dave Hutchinson, Alex Irvine, John Meaney, Adam Roberts, Rudy Rucker, S. M. Stirling, Charles Stross, Michael Swanwick and others – a good line-up, with strong British representation.) July 2003.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Forest of Stars: The Saga of Seven Suns [Book Two]**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6121-5, 727pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; sequel to *Hidden Empire* [2002], it's even bigger; states the blurb: "It has been five years since humanity's heady expansion among the stars came to an abrupt and violent halt. The emergence of the Hydrogues, an immensely powerful alien race dwelling within gas-giant planets, has placed the scattered colonies of the Terran Hanseatic League in jeopardy..."; with its Hanseatic League in space, and with characters bearing names like "Basil Wenceslas" [a saint meets a king, in Bohemia], this is all too clearly a saga in which the imagined future "Terra" really stands for little old Western European Civilization, or Latin Christendom.) 7th July 2003.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Hidden Empire: The Saga of Seven Suns, Book One**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-3065-4, 679pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; a very large space opera which the publishers described last year as "an epic in the truest sense of the word, combining the politics of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the scope of Peter F. Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy, and the pageantry and romance of *Star Wars*.) 7th July 2003.

Barclay, James. **Elfsorrow**. "Legends of the Raven." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07398-5, 483pp, A-format paperback, cover by Laura Brett, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; set in a world of warriors, mages and elves, this is the first of a new threesome, following the author's earlier "Chronicles of the Raven" trilogy.) 10th July 2003.

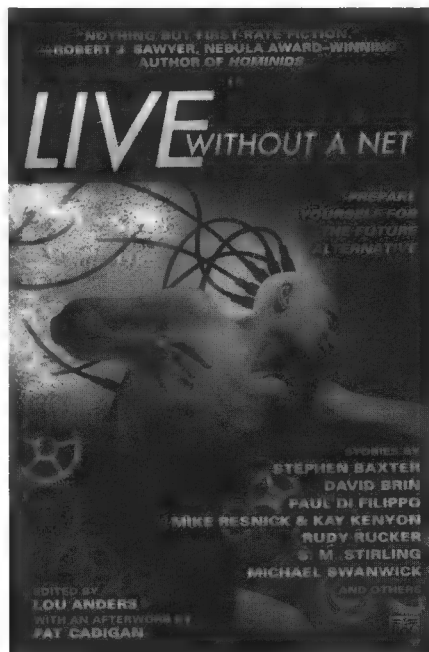
Barclay, James. **Shadowheart**. "Legends of the Raven." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07331-4, 421pp, C-format paperback, cover by Laura Brett, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 17th July 2003.

Baxter, Stephen. **Phase Space: Stories from the Manifold and Elsewhere**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651185-6, 426pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 2002; it contains 25 stories, some of them linked to Baxter's "Manifold" sequence of novels, but most of them set against varied backgrounds;

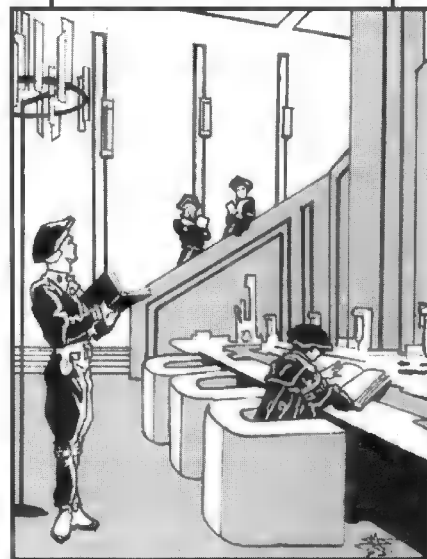
they are reprinted from a range of magazines and anthologies, and eight of them are from *Interzone* – "War Birds," "Sun God," "The Fubar Suit," "Lost Continent," "Tracks," "Barrier," "Marginalia" and "The Twelfth Album"; recommended.) 21st July 2003.

Bedwell-Grime, Stephanie. **Guardian Angel**. Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-62-6, 201pp, trade paperback, cover by Rick F. van Koert, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; for ordering information see the publishers' website: www.telos.co.uk; the heroine, Porsche Winter, is an angel, and "the object of the Devil's lust"; the author, whose name seems as unlikely as her heroine's, is described as having written "three previous novels and over 50 short stories" and as having been "a four-time finalist for the Aurora, the national Canadian award for speculative fiction" – which presumably makes her Canadian, although we're not told as much.) No date shown; received in June 2003.

Bell, Andrea L., and Yolanda Molina-Gavián, eds. **Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain**. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6634-9, xi+352pp, trade paperback, cover by Raúl Cruz, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$70; translated mainly from the Spanish by various hands, it is described as: "The first-ever collection of Latin American [and Spanish] science fiction in English... [It] offers popular and influential stories from over ten countries, chronologically ranging from 1862 to the present... In the 27 selections... a 16th-century conquistador becomes the unwitting pawn of an astronaut; government agents travel through time to stop terrorists from altering history; a Mexican factory worker is addicted to pleasure-giving bio-implants; and a man fleeing nationalist hysteria seeks refuge in a spaceship"; among the better-known authors represented are Miguel de Unamuno, Hugo Correa, Angélica Gorodischer, André Carneiro, Braulio Tavares, Elia Barceló, and the team of Ricard de la Casa & Pedro Jorge Romero;



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the inclusion of Brazilian authors like Carneiro and Tavares would indicate that a couple of the stories have been translated from Portuguese rather than Spanish; the most famous Latin American imaginative writer of the 20th century, Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, a number of whose stories are classifiable as sf, seems to have been rigorously excluded [presumably because his work is already widely known in English?]; this is another interesting and well-produced Wesleyan University Press book, complete with scholarly introduction, notes and bibliography; recommended.) 31st July 2003.

Berg, Carol. **Restoration**. "Book Three of The Rai-Kirah." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-245-0, 471pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; conclusion to the trilogy begin with *Transformation* [2000] and *Revelation* [2001] – by a new, but not young, American writer [born 1948].) 5th June 2003.

Borchardt, Alice. **The Raven Warrior**. "The Tales of Guinevere." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-05063-0, 470pp, C-format paperback, cover by Scott McKowen, £10.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; a follow-up to *The Dragon Queen* [2002], in which the queen must protect her people from "the reviled Saxon raiders" [hey, that's us! – unless you, dear reader, are Welsh or some other kind of Celt].) 3rd July 2003.

Bova, Ben. **Saturn**. "Grand Tour of the Solar System." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76767-7, 434pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2003; we listed the American [Tor Books] edition of this novel [June 2003] as the "first edition," but it seems there was a prior hardcover edition from Hodder & Stoughton in the UK – which we never saw.) 21st July 2003.



Brake, Colin. **The Colony of Lies.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48606-6, 272pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Second Doctor; Zoe and Jamie.) 7th July 2003.

Burridge, Richard A. **Faith Odyssey: Journey Through Life.** "Revised edition." Bible Reading Fellowship [First Floor, Elsfield Hall, 15-17 Elsfield Way, Oxford OX2 8FG], ISBN 1-84101-317-X, 224pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Work of Christian apologetics, using ■ its examples imaginative texts from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to the Hollywood movie *The Matrix*; the first edition appeared in the UK, 2000; this edition has been revised and has a new preface; the author is "a New Testament scholar and Dean of King's College, London," who is also "passionate about science fiction"; of course, his book's title echoes ■ well-known sf title of Arthur C. Clarke's, and indeed the latter sage gives this work his *imprimatur* – he is quoted on the back cover as saying: "It should silence the Eng. Lit. mandarins who regard science fiction as mental junk-food" [and, according to the publishers, it was also Sir Arthur who advised them to send ■ review copy to *Interzone*]; see also the website: www.faithodyssey.net.) 20th June 2003.

Card, Orson Scott. **Shadow Puppets.** "Book Three of the Shadow Saga." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-142-X, 477pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; follow-up to *Ender's Shadow* [1999] and *Shadow of the Hegemon* [2000], in the recent series of belated sequels to Card's greatest success, *Ender's Game* [1985].) 5th June 2003.

Clark, Simon. **Vampyrhic Rites.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-81940-5, 504pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £18.99. (Horror novel, first edition; it seems to concern vampires on the North Yorkshire Moors.) 14th July 2003.

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch Gate: Book Four of The Banned and the Banished.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-197-7, x+517pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the sequel to *Wit'ch Fire* [1998], *Wit'ch Storm* [1999] and *Wit'ch War* [2001], it's copyrighted in the name of Jim Czajkowski.) 5th June 2003.

Czerneda, Julie E., ed. **Space Inc.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0147-X, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jean-Pierre Normand, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 14 all-original stories about future employment prospects, by Eric Choi, James Alan Gardner, Tanya Huff, Nancy Kress, Robert J. Sawyer, Josepha Sherman, Alison Sinclair, S. M. & Janet Stirling and others – many of whom happen to be Canadian-born or -resident [although the book's "Canadian-ness" is not stressed]; this is, in effect, the latest issue of the ongoing DAW Books/Martin H. Greenberg paperback "pulp magazine" [although he's not named as co-editor, the copyright is shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) July 2003.

Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. **The Battle of Evernight: The Bitterbynde, Book III.** Tor (UK), ISBN 0-333-90757-4, xv+469pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Gregory, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; there may be ■ simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not

seen]; sequel to *The Ill-Made Mute* [2001], which was reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 173, and *The Lady of the Sorrows* [2002].) 1st August 2003.

Davis, Susan. **Delilah and the Dark Stuff.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54794-8, 280pp, B-format paperback, cover by Roman Grey, £4.99. (Young-adult humorous fantasy novel, first edition; about a trio of teenage girls who dabble in witchcraft and inadvertently resurrect ogres of the past, this is a follow-up to the author's earlier book *The Henry Game* [2002] – which we didn't see, but it seems the Henry referred to there was King Henry VIII; oddly, this is the second recent novel to feature as a ghostly character that dreadful man, Matthew Hopkins, the 17th-century Witchfinder General [the other was *Hiding from the Light* by Barbara Erskine, published in April by HarperCollins].) 5th June 2003.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twentieth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-30860-4, xxxix+648pp, trade paperback, cover by Dominic Harman, \$19.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$24.95; as well as the usual lengthy introduction and year's summation, it contains stories, all reprinted from 2002, by Eleanor Arnason, Kage Baker, Chris Beckett, Gregory Benford, Greg Egan, Molly Gloss, Alexander Irvine, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Paul McAuley, Ian McDonald, Maureen F. McHugh, Ian R. MacLeod, John Meaney, Robert Reed, Alastair Reynolds, Geoff Ryman, Bruce Sterling, Charles Stross, Michael Swanwick, Walter Jon Williams and others; three of the selections are from *Interzone*: Beckett's "To Become ■ Warrior"; Egan's "Singleton" and Meaney's "The Whisper of Discs"; another very solid anthology – recommended.) 22nd July 2003.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **The Elder Gods: Book One of The Dreamers.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-715758-4, 424pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; opening volume of ■ new tetralogy from "Voyager's biggest selling authors" [so states the publicity sheet]; it appears to be the mixture as before – bog-standard Big Commercial Fantasy, complete with a map of "the Land of Dhrall.") 15th July 2003.

Feist, Raymond E., and Steve Stirling. **Jimmy the Hand.** "Legends of the Riftwar." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224722-4, 369pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third in what appears to be a sharecropped series, following *Honoured Enemy* [2001], which was by Feist and William Forstchen, and *Murder in LaMut* [2002], which was by Feist and Joel Rosenberg; in this case, the co-author, Steve Stirling, is of course better known as S. M. Stirling.) 7th July 2003.

Fenton, Robert W. **Edgar Rice Burroughs and Tarzan: A Biography of the Author and His Creation.** Foreword by George T. McWhorter. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1393-X, x+212pp, hardcover, \$35. (Illustrated biographical study of the bestselling sf/fantasy writer and his most famous creation; originally published in the USA as *The Big Swingers*, 1967; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; although retitled, this is basically a straight reprint of Fenton's long-out-of-print *The Big Swingers*, with

McWhorter's short foreword and some new photographic illustrations added; the author died in 1968, a year or so after the original edition, so inevitably the book is dated; however, ■ McWhorter says, it's an item which all ERB fans will want – if they don't already have a copy.) August 2003.

Forward, Simon A. **Shell Shock.** Foreword by Guy N. Smith. Frontispiece by Bob Covington. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-17-0, 105pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover; not seen] priced at £10; the limited "deluxe edition" which has been sent as a review copy is signed by author, illustrator and foreword-writer; this is the eighth in a series of handsomely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from David J. Howe and Stephen James Walker's Telos imprint; for ordering information see their website: www.telos.co.uk.) Late entry: 29th May publication, received in June 2003.

Furey, Maggie. **The Eye of Eternity: Book Three of The Shadowleague.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-113-6, 708pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; conclusion of ■ Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy of the kind that this English-born, Irish-resident author specializes in.) July 2003.

Gascoigne, Marc, and Christian Dunn, eds. **Way of the Dead: Warhammer Fantasy Stories.** "Warhammer." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-013-0, 283pp, A-format paperback, cover by Karl Kopinski, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff anthology, first edition; it contains stories by GW/Warhammer regulars Brian Craig [Brian Stableford], Jonathan Green, Graham McNeill, Simon Spurrier, C. L. Werner and others.) 23rd June 2003.

Graham, Ian. **Monument.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-196-9, 568pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a debut book by a new British writer [born 1971], it was commended by David Gemmell and described by *Starburst's* reviewer as "blood-thirsty, action-packed fantasy.") 24th July 2003.

Green, Jonathan. **Crusade for Armageddon.** "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-025-4, 280pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; ■ second novel by a new British writer who has contributed short stories to GW's *Inferno!* magazine.) 23rd June 2003.

Hamilton, Peter F. **Misspent Youth.** Pan, ISBN 0-333-48022-7, 439pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a tale of rejuvenation, set a few decades in the future.) 7th July 2003.

Holdstock, Robert. **The Iron Grail: Book Two of the Merlin Codex.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-4032-3, 418pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; follow-up to *Celtika* [2001].) 4th August 2003.

Irvine, Ian. **Geomancer: Volume One of The Well of Echoes**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-137-3, 621pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2001; the beginning of a new series of Big Commercial Fantasies by the author of the "View from the Mirror" quartet; Irvine was born in Australia in 1950, and has a PhD in marine sciences.) 24th July 2003.

Keyes, Greg. **The Briar King: The Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone, Book One**. Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-3351-7, 552pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Peterson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; yet more BCF – about "war and virtue, sorcery and betrayal" – by the American author who also writes media spinoffs as J. Gregory Keyes; it's odd, isn't it, that such a deeply republican country as the United States should keep producing these fantasy-dreams about kings and queens, princes and princesses, and royal families?) 25th July 2003.

Lalumière, Claude, and Mart Halpern, eds. **Witpunk**. Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-256-0, vi+346pp, trade paperback, cover by Joel Tipple, £11.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 2003; this is the American first edition of April 2003 with a UK price specified, distributed in the UK by Turnaround, Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ; it consists of about half reprint and half original stories, ranging from "dark comedy to laugh-out-loud farce, from surrealistic fancy to cautionary satire, from rebellious transgression to exuberant hilarity, from gonzo weirdness to macabre humour," by Pat Cadigan, Bradley Denton, Paul Di Filippo, Jeffrey Ford, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, James Morrow, Pat Murphy, Robert Silverberg, William Browning Spencer, Allen M. Steele, Don Webb and others; two stories, Eugene Byrne's "Bagged 'n' Tagged" and David Langford's "Encounter of Another Kind," are reprints from *Interzone*; recommended.) 17th July 2003.

Langford, David. **He Do the Time Police in Different Voices: SF Parody and Pastiche**. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-058-5, 222pp, trade paperback, cover by Juha Lindroos, \$16.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; there is also a hardcover edition [not seen; price not given]; this welcome book subsumes Langford's earlier parody collection, *The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two* [1988]; the original gathering has been more than doubled in size, with the inclusion of a dozen more ingenious, funny stories ["almost pointlessly brilliant," according to Michael Swanwick]; three of them – "The Net of Babel" [1995], "The Spear of the Sun" [1996] and "The Case of Jack the Clipper" [1997] – first appeared in *Interzone*; recommended; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; to order, see the website: www.wildsidepress.com.) July 2003.

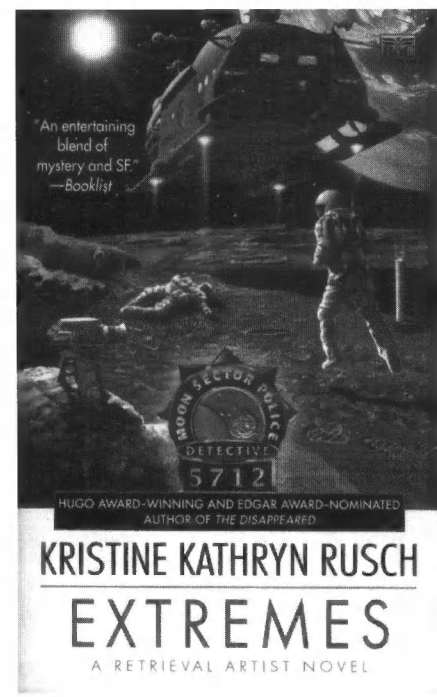
Larsen, Darl. **Monty Python, Shakespeare and English Renaissance Drama**. Foreword by William Proctor Williams. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1504-5, ix+236pp, trade paperback, \$35. (Critical study of Shakespeare's [and other dramatists'] influence on the Pythons; first edition; ster-

ling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; this looks to be a serious study of a popular subject, written by an American scholar [born 1963; teaches at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah]; there are no illustrations; so what is the sf or fantasy relevance of this book about Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and a bunch of latter-day comedians? – well, the BBC TV show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was fantasy of a sort, wasn't it? [one would have thought it was more in the tradition of Lucian of Samosata than of Shakespeare and the Jacobean, but maybe this book will persuade otherwise...] August 2003.

Lassiter, Rhiannon. **Borderland**. "Rights of Passage." Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-09-275237-5, 218pp, B-format paperback, £4.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; about teenagers and magic in a parallel world, this is the opener in a new trilogy by a British writer [born 1977] who lives in Oxford; her first book was called *Hex*.) July 2003.

Lindsay, David. **A Voyage to Arcturus**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 37." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07483-3, 280pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jean Delville, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1920; a classic of the weird, about an earthman's journey to the planet Tormance in orbit around the star Arcturus, it has some of the trappings of science fiction but is really more of a metaphysical fantasy; the author [1876-1945] was British; this is the third new edition of Lindsay's strange book to appear within a year – the others, both issued in August 2002, were from University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books [USA] and Savoy Books [Manchester, UK].) 12th June 2003.

Lockley, Steve, and Paul Lewis. **King of All the Dead**. Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-61-8, 120pp, trade paperback, £8. (Horror novella, first edition; for ordering information see the website: www.telos.co.uk; this is a new horror outing by two British small-press veterans; states the blurb: "From the authors of *The Ragchild* [1999] ... a terri-



fyng and nailbiting ride into the unknown.") No date shown; received in June 2003.

Mackay, Kenneth. **The Yellow Wave: A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia**. Edited by Andrew Enstice and Janeen Webb. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6632-2, xxxiv+350pp, trade paperback, cover by Frank P. Mahony, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1895; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$60; the author [1859-1935] was Australian-born [to a Scottish father who had lived in China before arriving in Australia] and was a soldier and local politician by profession; this novel, one of a few volumes of fiction and verse he published, concerns a near-future Russian invasion of Australia utilizing Chinese troops; it is one of a number of similar racially-tinged "dreadful-warning" fictions of its time, and has not been reprinted in over a century; this well-produced edition, with its extensive introduction and notes, and its reproduction of the book's few original illustrations, is welcome as a contribution to the prehistory of sf and as an Antipodean curiosity.) 26th June 2003.

McNish, Cliff. **The Silver Child**. Illustrated by Geoff Taylor. Orion, ISBN 1-84255-259-7, 167pp, hardcover, cover by Taylor, £8.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new work by the British author of the "Doomspell Trilogy" [2000-2002].) 1st August 2003.

Marillier, Juliet. **Wolfskin**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30672-7, 493pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Craft, \$25.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; New Zealand/Australian writer Marillier continues her exploration of the British Isles' past in this, the opening volume of a trilogy which features Norsemen in Orkney: "... a new fantasy saga, a wonderful love story set amid high adventure" [note: a British edition came out from Tor UK in March 2003].) 29th June 2003.

Masson, David I. **The Caltraps of Time**. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-106-9, vii+239pp, trade paperback, cover by Juha Lindroos, \$17.99. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 1968; there is also a hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$29.99; oddly, this is described in the accompanying publicity sheet as a "newly expanded edition," yet no such words appear on the book itself, either on contents page or cover; yet expanded it is – in addition to the original seven stories [all from *New Worlds* magazine] which appeared in the 1968 Faber & Faber edition, it contains three more, all taken from original anthologies of the day: "The Show Must Go On" [1970], "Take It or Leave It" [1970] and "Doctor Fausta" [1974]; there is also a new, two-paragraph "Author's Foreword," dated December 2002; in short, this is a very welcome expanded edition of a classic collection – it's just a pity that the publishers don't mark it more clearly as such; David Irvine Masson [born 1915], who lives in Leeds, has written no more fiction since the 1970s, and this remains his sole sf book; recommended; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; to order, see the website: www.wildsidepress.com.) Late entry: April publication, received in July 2003.





Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Archform: Beauty.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-251-5, 434pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tim Byrne, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; this is a stand-alone sf novel of ideas – it's not part of any of Modesitt's endless fantasy series.) 5th June 2003.

Mór, Caiseal. **The Meeting of the Waters: Book One of the Watchers Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6853-8, viii+477pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2000; more Faerie-and-Druid stuff, set in Owld Ireland.) 17th July 2003.

Newcomb, Robert. **The Fifth Sorceress: Volume I of The Chronicles of Blood and Stone.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81453-2, 876pp, A-format paperback, cover by Justin Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; the debut Big Commercial Fantasy of a new American writer, even if the byline suggests a pseudonym [a newcomer called "Newcomb"?].) 3rd July 2003.

Newcomb, Robert. **The Gates of Dawn: Volume II of The Chronicles of Blood and Stone.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04962-4, 467pp, C-format paperback, cover by Justin Sweet, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; still more BCF – follow-up to *The Fifth Sorceress* [2002]; the author is described as "a businessman and dowser" who lives in Florida.) 3rd July 2003.

Pohl, Frederik, and C. M. Kornbluth. **The Space Merchants.** "SF Masterworks, 54." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07528-7, 186pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; originally serialized in *Galaxy* magazine as "Gravy Planet" [1952], this is the classic satire on a future society run by advertisers.) 10th July 2003.

Robinson, Spider. **Callahan's Con.** "The newest book in the bestselling Callahan's series if finally here!" Tor, ISBN 0-765-30270-5, 286pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* and many others by this Canadian-resident US author who was popular back in the 1970s and '80s.) July 2003.

Rucker, Rudy. **Spaceland.** "A Novel of the Fourth Dimension." Tor, ISBN 0-765-30367-1, 301pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; madcap mathematician Rucker's first novel for Tor, the hardcover was described as "a rousing hard-SF homage to *Flatland*, Edwin Abbot's classic math fiction"; reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 183.) 14th July 2003.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **Extremes: A Retrieval Artist Novel.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45934-2, 373pp, A-format paperback, cover by Greg Bridges, \$6.50. (Sf/crime novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Disappeared* [2002], and second in a series based on the author's novella "The Retrieval Artist" [published in *Analog*], it's dedicated: "For Jack Williamson, with love.") July 2003.

Russell, Jay. **Brown Harvest.** Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-211-0, 340pp, trade paperback, cover by A. Galperin, £8.99. (Humorous fantasy/crime novel, first published in the USA, 2001; this is the American first edition with a UK price specified, distributed in the

UK by Turnaround, Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ; it's described as "a delicious dark parody that mingles famous literary characters with hardboiled noir"; trendy writers Jonathan Lethem and James Sallis both commend it; by a New York-born American author who lives in London, it seems to be a spoof on the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, with many other references to well-known fictional characters of yesteryear; Gordon Van Gelder, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, is acknowledged as an inspirer of the novel, and other pals of the author who are name-checked in the acknowledgments include Pat Cadigan, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Paul McAuley and Kim Newman ["for Friday lunches in Islington"]; the accompanying publicity sheet tells us that "St Martin's Press originally planned to publish *Brown Harvest*, but cancelled the book under lawyers' advice due to its content" [which explains the dedication to Gordon Van Gelder – he was an editor at St Martin's Press some years ago, and no doubt was the original commissioner of this work].) 11th July 2003.

Scott, Martin. **Thraxas at War.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-242-8, 268pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Thomas, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; "Martin Scott" is a pseudonym of British writer Martin Millar; this is the seventh in a series of "pulp fantasy noir" paperback originals, the first three of which – *Thraxas*, *Thraxas and the Warrior Monks* and *Thraxas at the Races* – all came out close together in 1999, with the fourth, *Thraxas and the Elvish Isles*, the fifth, *Thraxas and the Sorcerers*, and the sixth, *Thraxas and the Dance of Death*, following in 2000, 2001 and 2002; the first book became the unexpected winner of the [American] World Fantasy Award for best novel of 1999, a left-field decision by the judges which perplexed many observers.) July 2003.

Shimeld, Thomas J. **Walter B. Gibson and The Shadow.** Foreword by Robert W. Gibson. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1466-9, x+190pp, hardcover, \$45. (Illustrated biographical study of a pulp-magazine writer and his most famous creation; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; The Shadow was primarily a crime-fiction hero – invented in 1930 for a radio show, although soon featuring in his own pulp magazine from Street & Smith – but many of his exploits overlapped with the fantastic, the horrific, and the science-fictional; his creator, Walter Gibson [1897-1985], who wrote mainly under the house name "Maxwell Grant," was immensely prolific; this study is by an author [born 1977] who is much too young to have known The Shadow in his heyday, but nevertheless it seems well-informed and expertly put together.) September 2003.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Longest Way Home.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07393-4, 262pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; originally serialized in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, October 2001-January 2002; reviewed by Paul Beardsley in *Interzone* 184.) 10th July 2003.

Stableford, Brian. **The Omega Expedition.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30598-4, 544pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Pollack, \$17.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; sixth and last in the loose series of highly imaginative biotech novels Stableford has written for Tor Books, following *Inherit the Earth* [1998], *Architects of Emortality* [1999], *The*

Fountains of Youth [2000], *The Cassandra Complex* [2001] and *Dark Ararat* [2002]; this one is partly based on a short story published in *Interzone* many years ago – "And He Not Busy Being Born..." [1986].) 24th July 2003.

Stirling, S. M. **T2: The Future War.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07157-5, 357pp, C-format paperback, cover by Susan Sanguly, £9.99. (Sf-movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; third in the series "based on the world created in the motion picture written by James Cameron and William Wisner"; in place of a dedication, on a page of its own, there's this brief non-committal statement: "In acknowledgment of the works of Harlan Ellison.") 24th July 2003.

Stirling, S. M. **T2: Rising Storm.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07399-3, 469pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf-movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; second in a series which is "based on the world created in the motion picture written by James Cameron and William Wisner"; as with the first book, they don't fully name the film in question, but obviously it's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.) 12th June 2003.

Stover, Matthew. **Shatterpoint.** "Star Wars: A Clone Wars Novel." Century/Lucas Books, ISBN 1-8441-3365-6, 406pp, hardcover, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £16.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003.) 5th June 2003.

Watson, Ian. **Miracle Visitors.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07503-1, 239pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1978; one of Watson's best, an ideas-rich tale of UFOs and metaphysics.) 19th June 2003.

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **Reunion: Force Heretic, III.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941039-7, xiv+390pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Foster, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; the duo of Australian space-opera experts continue to rent out their talents to George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise in this last of a trilogy.) 3rd July 2003.

Wyndham, John. **No Place Like Earth.** Introduction by John Pelan. Notes by Phil Stephenson-Payne. Darkside Press [4128 Woodland Park Ave. N., Seattle, WA 98103, USA], ISBN 0-9740-589-0, 285pp, hardcover, cover by Allen Koszowski, \$40. (Sf collection, first edition; this is a handsomely-designed volume limited to 500 copies; John Wyndham, also known as John Beynon Harris [1903-1969], remains one of Britain's best-known sf writers, mainly thanks to the continuing sales of his novels such as *The Day of the Triffids* [1951]; a number of posthumous collections of his shorter stories appeared in the 1970s, but they did not quite exhaust the material; this well-produced new collection attempts to finish the job, including as it does a number of previously-unreprinted stories – although there are also several here which did appear in earlier collections; among the less familiar pieces are "The Meddler" [*Argosy* (US), 1958], "Wise Child" [*Argosy* (UK), 1962], "In Outer Space There Shone a Star" [*TV Times*, 1965], "Blackmoil" [written 1967, but unpublished anywhere until now] and "A Life Postponed" [*Galaxy*, 1968]; recommended to all Wyndham readers and collectors.) No date shown: received in July 2003.

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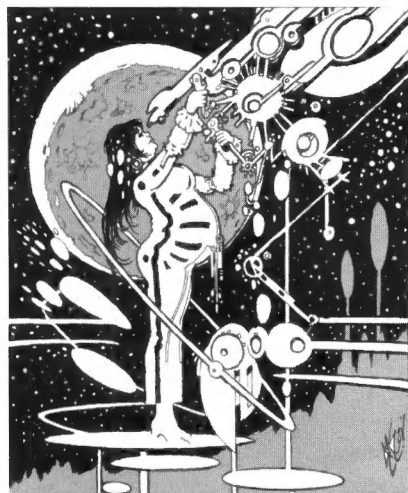
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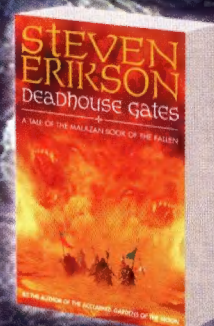
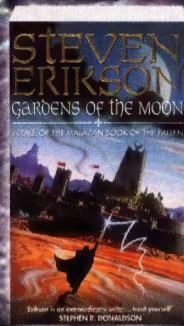
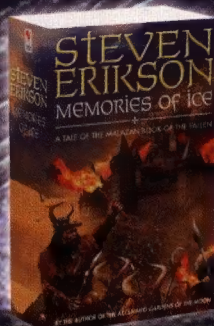
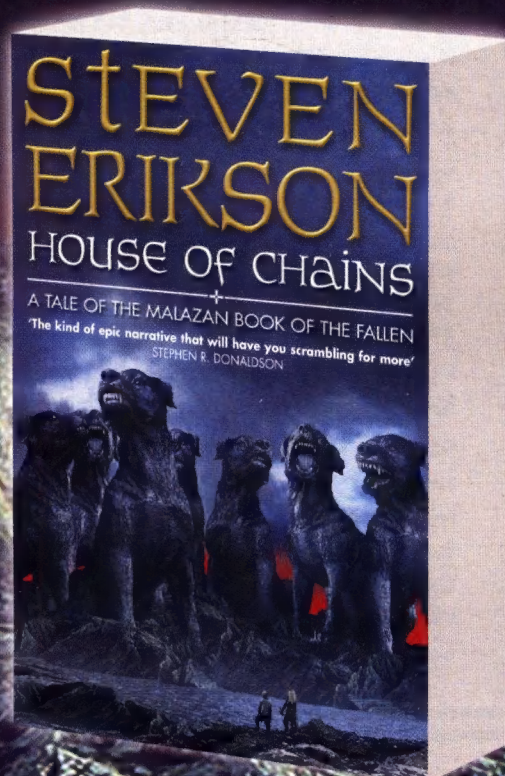
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